

SOLDES

Meeting Place
by Heather Bursch

ON VIEW

January 13 –
February 10, 2024

EXHIBITION OPENING

January 13, 5–8pm

For Immediate Release

The Production of the Ornament

Heather Bursch's installation, *Meeting Place*, presents us with a negative image of the Schiff Fountain as it stands today on Manhattan's Lower East Side. When the fountain was first installed in 1894 it was decorated in neoclassical style, with aquatic motifs — incorporating a clamshell and fish design — and lion heads from whose mouths water poured. Soon after installation, the bronze ornaments were stolen, and the water supply blocked with refuse. In 1935 the fountain was relocated from Rutgers Square down the block and set within the edge of Seward Park, making room for the construction of the subway line from Essex/Delancey Street to East Broadway. The fountain was restored and the ornaments re-fabricated, only to be stolen again over the course of the following decades. Eventually, the water ceased to flow and, in 2022, the basin was filled with dirt, transforming the fountain into a planter. For *Meeting Place* Bursch has recreated the Schiff Fountain's stolen ornaments. Her *replacements*, as she calls them, are attached to brass stands indexing them to the height at which they originally sat on the fountain. In the gallery they are installed in a circular formation to evoke the fountain's enclosure. Bursch shows us just what is missing from the fountain as it exists today — now more brutalist than neoclassical — with its denuded basin, lower dish and granite column on which one can still make out the faint inscription from Exodus: "And there shall come water out of it, that the people may drink" (Exodus 17:6).

This inscription links the nearly 20th Century Schiff Fountain to an ancient past, and to the role of water in sustaining the life of a people. Jacob Schiff, who donated the eponymous fountain, intended it as a gathering place for the tenement population of the Lower East Side. The fountain's epigraph

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refers us to the Jews flight from bondage in Egypt, lead by Moses. In this passage from Exodus, Moses comes to God and tells him that the people are parched for lack of water. They are losing faith in their journey and losing faith that their God will provide. God tells Moses to gather together a group of elders and take them to the rock of Horeb, where he will be waiting. Moses must then hit the rock with his staff. With this blow, water will spring forth and the people will know that God is among them. Thus, water sustains the life of the community, simultaneously quenching their thirst and affirming their unity. Power and abundance travel from God, through Moses, through his staff, into the rock, and finally burst forth as water, through which they reach the people. This narrative parallel's Schiff's own philanthropic donation of the public fountain; only in this latter instance power and abundance are generated by high finance, channeled by Schiff—in his role as investment banker — to the decorative fountain where it is symbolized by the ever renewed flow fed by the municipal water supply.

Despite these theological overtones, the Schiff fountain is a civic monument, not a religious one. Its displacement, from Rutgers Square to Seward Park, and its disuse are part of the logic of a city structured by the flow of goods and the circulation of ever more abstract forms of capital, maximizing modularity and flexibility. In *Delirious New York*, Rem Koolhaas describes the particular fluidity of New York City's grid system: "the Grid's two dimensional discipline creates undreamt of freedom for three dimensional anarchy. The Grid defines a new balance between control and de-control in which the city can be at the same time ordered and fluid, a metropolis of rigid chaos." The very uniformity of the grid lays the ground for the city's mutability: "all blocks are the same; their equivalence invalidates, at once, all the systems of articulation and differentiation that have guided the design of traditional cities. The Grid makes the history of architecture and all previous lessons of urbanism irrelevant. It forces Manhattan's builders to develop a new system of formal values, to invent strategies for the distinction of one block from another."¹

These micro-distinctions are the stuff of real estate speculation, micro-neighborhoods spring up suddenly, only to be washed away in the next wave of urban development. The Lower East Side has been made over many times since Schiff's fountain was unveiled, its economic and social dynamics shifting like a kaleidoscope. The Schiff Fountain most recently found itself incorporated into Dimes Square, described by Vanity Fair in 2022 as a "tiny but infamous cluster of Manhattan blocks where skaters,

¹ Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*, (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1994) p.20

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intellectuals, and the art world collide, now entering its luxury-hotel era.²” The capital — cultural and otherwise — flowing through an art scene is hoovered back up into the world of high finance. Whatever intentions animated Schiff’s public donation of the fountain have been as ephemeral as its neoclassical stylings.

The Schiff Fountain’s twice fabricated, twice stripped ornaments are lost, so for her *replacements* Bursch turned to drawings and photographs from the New York City Parks Photo Archive. She produced digital models mimicking the images, 3D printed the positive forms, and used these forms to cast her *replacements* in white resin. Bursch’s Meeting Place is doubly negative: showing us what has been subtracted from the existing Schiff Fountain and depicting those missing ornaments in the negative, as a kind of mold from which new ornaments might be cast.

Bursch’s “void in the shape of a fountain”³ brings to mind another fountain, this one in the shape of a urinal: Duchamp’s infamous 1917 readymade, consisting of an up-to-the-minute, porcelain pissoir, signed R. Mutt. Duchamp’s *Fountain* evokes the stripped-down, form-as-function ethos that characterized both state of the art American plumbing, circa 1917, and the then flourishing modernist aesthetic. As Ernst Bloch so wryly puts it in *The Spirit of Utopia* (1918):

“It knew, the machine, how to make everything as lifeless and subhuman on a small scale as our newer urban developments are on a larger scale. Its real objective is the bathroom and the toilet, these most indisputable and original accomplishments of our time, just as Rococo furniture and Gothic cathedrals represent structures that define every other art object of their respective epochs. Now lavatoriality dominates; somehow, water runs from every wall, and even the most expensive products of our age’s industrial diligence now partake of the wizardry of modern sanitation, the a priori of the finished industrial product.⁴”

In the meeting of even the most rudimentary of bodily needs an aesthetic is founded. So too with public fountains, used for bathing or drinking, and through which a rhetoric of power and abundance, of nature and commu-

2 Nate Freeman, “What Was Dimes Square?”, (Vanity Fair online, June 13, 2022)

3 Heather Bursch, “F_PDF_017”, PDF (published online by F Magazine) p. 6.

4 Ernst Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, trans. Anthony A. Nassar, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000) p.11.

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nity is imbibed. This excess, which is both aesthetic and political, is most concentrated in the ornamental, that which is most conspicuously in excess of function, and in which the spirit of an age crystalizes. Here that spirit is held in suspension through Bursch's ghostly *replacements*, neither simply absent, nor quite, positively, present.

—Lakshmi Luthra

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