

Thomson, Allese. "Mark Handforth." Artforum. 17 May 2014. Web.

ARTFORUM



Mark Handforth, *Painted Phone*, 2013, aluminum, bronze and stainless steel, 25 x 4 x 2'.

Miami-based artist Mark Handforth is widely recognized for his large-scale public sculptures. For his latest project, he has created four new works on Governors Island in New York. Along with artist Susan Phillipsz, he is an inaugural artist of the island's new public art program, which is curated by Tom Eccles. Handforth's project, "Sidewalk Island," opens to the public on May 24, 2014, and will be on view until 2016.

GOVERNORS ISLAND IS a strange, unlikely, and wild chunk of nature floating in Upper New York Bay; it is both mannered and totally abandoned. Parts of the island have beautiful rolling hills and empty Georgian mansions; elsewhere there are burned and curdled buildings that endure like a dystopian memory. And still other parts of the island have been completely relandscaped as a defiantly contemporary vision of a park. It's also usually and weirdly full of activity—wild concerts, retro costume balls, art of every description, performances, hot dog trucks, bicycles, and on and on. I thought a lot about how an artwork could hold its own there but also simultaneously give itself over to all of these varied experiences. I made pieces that want to be surrounded by people—completed by crowds.

"Sidewalk Island" consists of four sculptures situated in close enough proximity to form a conversation among themselves but far enough apart to be a kind of journey, a walk, a

surprise. Yankee Hanger is a massive languid hanger that droops into noodley linear form—it is a line in space that frames the people in and around it into a kind of landscape. There is a floating phone caught in a totemic lopped-off bronze tree, Painted Phone, that echoes the wonderful arm of Lady Liberty in the (surprisingly) close distance. Also a small cast iron hydrant, Weeping Hydrant, collapsing into a liquid pool of itself, and Saffron Star, a faceted and disjointed star that balances on a grassy knoll, projecting itself across the water toward Brooklyn. These pieces have some elements of abstract formality consuming meaning and an absurdist nature that verges on melancholia. This basic conversation about the strange poles of living seemed appropriate for a park, for a place where everyone's dramas are acted out.

There's always a kind of dual responsibility when creating a public work: You need to be open to and respectful of the sensibilities, the mood, the basic realities of the place, and, simultaneously, you have to approach the work with the same rigor with which you would approach a gallery or museum show, making sure not to compromise the integrity of the work or somehow dumb it down. It's a strange thing to be among all these hot dog carts and still remain clearly your best self. It doesn't always work out—hence the rather odd reputation that public art has. I'm nevertheless a true believer in the need for a visceral public art dialogue, and I've tried to make that a core component of my work.

In Miami, for example, I created Electric Tree, which is essentially a fluorescent light drawing that delineates the limbs of an enormous and auspicious banyan tree canopy in a Haitian neighborhood. The work effectively takes the tree's highly social pool of daytime shade and mirrors it with an equally social and soulful pool of light at night. In Paris, I crumpled a stadium lamppost at the Porte de Bagnolet (the posts are ubiquitous on the nearby Peripherique), twisting it into a star form for Twisted Lamppost Star. Its kinetic movement feeds directly off the frenzied rush of a crazily busy intersection, of which the sculpture forms the axis. These movements create a different formal reading from each canyon-like street approach. The piece is as much about this daily process of passing through as it is about holding place: It feeds off that urgency but also holds it at bay, a twisted city dancer. Often, public spaces—especially one like Governors Island—are a polar opposite to the protective white cube we so easily occupy, and so I decided to feed off that rather than be devoured by it. I wanted to speak to that messy freedom but not cramp it.