*Sanctuary*

A sculpture by Justin Peyser

1

Deep in the woods in a small clearing you come across a rectangular cluster of about ten massive wooden posts standing upright, most a foot or two higher than a person and about 10 by 20. From afar it appears to be a kind of building, possibly a shelter, but as you near that idea recedes. There is neither a roof nor walls nor any sign there ever was.

Nor is it a ruin, which when seen from far off it resembles: the material is not degraded or overgrown. The posts are solid and stand plumb. But it is not tended either, and there is no clear border between the posts and the surrounding woods, nor a clear path up to it. All that is clear is a deliberateness of design and construction.

There is something vaguely figurative about the posts, which are of different heights and widths, and might suggest a group of people standing. But the potential figurativeness is thrown off by a second element: dozens of curved metal forms of heavy forged steel roughly a foot across that have been affixed to the posts in no discernable order. They resemble letters, or symbols, or pictograms, but it is unclear how they relate to the structure: mounted at multiple heights on the inner and outer faces of the posts, a few on top, it is not clear whether they were part of the original plan, or added later.

As you walk through and around this structure, the two elements pull away from each other, one architectural, one linguistic. The rough rectangular grid of the posts recalls the columns of a classical temple. Though all are different, they radiate a clear order. But the steel pieces introduce another feature. Because most occur more than once – one does 10 times- they appear to comprise an alphabet or symbolic language, and the way each is attached, by a tapered steel end driven deep into the wood, suggests a deliberate and permanent positioning intended to broadcast some message or mark some event or process.

But for whom? And what is the structure for? Here, alone in the woods, without a person in sight, all that seems clear is that the structure must have a function that some people understand and put to use – why else would it be here? Hobo symbols come to mind: the signs scrawled along their habitual routes to convey information (“old lady gives food”, “vicious dog”, “barn loft good to sleep,” etc.) to hobos who will come after, in code so only they will understand. Just as the hobo signs call attention to a particular hidden world and people, so with this structure, while offering no clues who or for what. That may become clear only when it is seen in action.

It is not a monument but the opposite. An instrument without instructions how to play. The key to its use is absent. This exerts a powerful gravity on the mind. A bare and compelling encounter with an unknown thing.

2

The piece has a visceral power independent of any aesthetic consideration, no matter what it is. Some immanent function and connection to the real world is immediately assumed and draws attention both to itself and beyond it. Much of its power lies in its restraint and obscurity. It contains only two elements: building and language. Human history in extreme reduction. The aesthetic has been subsumed in or overridden by the functional. Even the steel “letters” – which alone open towards the decorative or expressive – are, as language, primarily functional as well. Though the function of neither is clear, it is this that dominates consideration of the piece. The independence of the two elements itself is compelling. The irregular occurrence of the letters, why some are clumped on certain posts, and just a few are sunk into the tops, suggests a process separate from the assembly of the wood structure and one with a clear if elusive set of reasons. The fact that one letter occurs ten times and others just twice or thrice suggests yet another logic at work, equally elusive, equally effective in rousing curiosity.

The point of the hypothetical in section 1 above -the description of the piece “in the wild”- may be problematic. What use is it state that a work of art is effective when not known to be a work of art – and even to suggest that it may be more effective as such? What would that even mean? That people linger around it trying to figure out what it is, and think about it long after they’ve walked away from it? That would not be a bad standard for the evaluation of any creation.

But what happens to the way you see the piece when it is named and identified as a work of art? Even if the title is “Untitled”, the way you look at it changes. Does the “bare and compelling encounter with an unknown thing” become impossible?

Before, it seemed to be an object made by an unknown group for an unknown purpose and was thus real and had a real function. It excited curiosity and a slight uneasiness, as if those who made and used this thing might return or be watching you watch. Now you know it is the work of an artist, made as a work of art, to mean the way art means. Rather than its function and origin, you try to discern what the artist is expressing, the idea, the approach, the message of a single person.

It is unclear what is gained and what is lost in this shift. When an unusual object out in the world is identified as “art”, does it become more or less powerful and thought-provoking? Or is this idea nonsense, and is the lens of the gallery or museum necessary to produce any deep or powerful encounter with an object, whatever its status?

3

The addition of the title “*Sanctuary”* to the piece further transforms it.

The mere idea of sanctuary produces a powerful gravity. In rich and poor countries alike, people are assailed by a sense of beleaguerment, precariousness, and vulnerability. The world’s problems feel intractable and neither walls nor distance offer real protection, from war and disease to mass shootings and drought, for just a start.

More vivid and immediate to people than the notion of sanctuary is its opposite: places of absolute precariousness and exposure, whether legally engineered (Guantanamo), climatic, epidemiological, or geopolitical. As I write, the air of this city of 8-plus million people has been declared dangerous to breathe because of smoke from wildfires 2000 miles away, and streams of migrants can be seen fleeing misery and violence so extreme they risk death to try to enter wealthier and safer countries where they in turn are met as a danger and threat.

It is worth pointing out that two of the fundamental works on sanctuary were written in 1936 and 1939, respectively, as the world was moving towards the greatest test of sanctuary it had yet faced. There were two basic elements to the notion as set out in these works: first, “Sacred places should be protected from acts of violence” (Garrard Glenn, “The Right of Sanctuary”, Virginia Quarterly Review, Autumn 1936). And second, “There must exist a statutorily-designated place where an individual with reason to fear the action of a man or group can be guaranteed protection.” *Le droit d'asile* ; Pierre Timbal Duclaux de Martin ; Recueil Sirey, 1939.

In the ancient world the principle of sanctuary arose from a need to slow vengeance enough to allow some process of reasoned judgment to take place. Underlying it was a general recognition that some buffer against the fevers that periodically overtake society is necessary. It was a case of erring on the side of caution rather than vengeance where and when the legal system was incapable of producing fair-seeming outcomes. For example, in the early Christian era, it was the church’s distrust of the Roman judicial system that led it to carry forward the sanctuary tradition that had persisted among the Jews, Egyptians, and Greeks – and which continued in Europe until the development of a more developed judicial machinery in the 1600s, when the practice of sanctuary was explicitly ended.

There is an inverse relation between sanctuary culture, rooted in a recognition of solidarity among all people and a “do unto others...” logic, and the scapegoat culture resurgent today across the world, which designates an outsider to blame for problems and deflect attention from their real causes. The first leans towards a presumption of innocence, the latter a presumption of guilt.

Rule by reason vs rule by fear.

But while these dichotomies are familiar to people today, what is less familiar, and to many even inconceivable, is the idea of a zone of exception within which processes accepted as if emanating from natural law – violence, depredation, commodification - are suspended, and that the people themselves can bring about such a suspension.

4

The addition of the title does not resolve but rather excites the tensions within it. If it is neither a shelter nor an enclosure, how is it a sanctuary? The posts are so close together that they arouse more a sense of discomfort than of protection. From within, the structure feels like a maze. There is no spot from which all of the columns are visible or from which even half of the letters are. Entering deepens the obscurity rather than relieves it and plants a desire to see it from above as if another vantage point might clarify what it is. And the letters, which positioned differently might have communicated some message to people from afar, instead protrude from the posts and are more likely to bruise or cut than enlighten.

This of course must be the point: *Sanctuary* is anything but. The sense of order promised from afar gives way to disorder once the space is entered. It is closer to a trap than a shelter, a mirage, an act of misdirection, luring from afar into a structure that is hard to enter and possibly harder to exit. The piece is dysfunctional both as architecture and as language.

But clearly the strategy of the artist here is not to produce the craved thing: an actual sanctuary, which the viewer can enter and there experience a relief from the processes that assail them. Rather, the piece invokes and revokes it in the same gesture. The tension between the object and its title seems to be a sought effect.

*Sanctuary* contains a single, subtle hint at what it is. At the bottom of one of the posts, lower that any of the forged letters, is a steel ring hanging from a steel eye, also pounded into the wood, not hand forged like the other letters but immediately identifiable as a mass-produced item. Retained as if the seed from which the rest grew, this ring is the connection to the historical notion of sanctuary the piece invokes.

“The sanctuary knocker was a metal ring attached to the door of a church. A fugitive from the law had only to touch the knocker to claim the right of sanctuary. This allowed him to stay in the church, free from prosecution, for a period of time, usually 40 days.” https://www.britainexpress.com/church-history.htm?term=Sanctuary+Knocker

It would have been simple for Peyser to simply produce the craved thing and build a structure covered with medieval sanctuary rings. This route he chose instead, of obscurity and restraint, produces a very different effect.

5

Once *Sanctuary* is named and acknowledged to be a work of art, it becomes a representation, a simulacrum, intended for viewers as opposed to users. Aestheticized and intellectualized, its function is neutralized, merely cited, no longer offered. Indeed, to not recognize its neutered status as a work of art would be dangerous – i.e., to think it offered real protection.

But the exhibition of *Sanctuary* raises an intriguing possibility. A gallery, like a sanctuary, is a zone of exception, the latter legal, the former aesthetic or phenomenological, a site where objects are presented in a way that they can be experienced neutrally, on their own terms.

It might thus be natural -even inevitable- that the piece would extend its invoked function as protective site to the exhibition space itself. In this case, the people who would have availed themselves of the unlabeled structure out in the woods (which they alone recognized and understood the use of) would see the very same structure now in a white-walled gallery, and assuming its function hadn’t changed with its relocation, seek protection in it regardless.

For them, the intellectual puzzle the piece represents -the tension between the object and the name - does not matter. And for them, indeed, the name of the piece alone is enough to revive its practice.

This would be a striking evolution of the readymade. In place of aestheticizing an object stripped of its function, the object transfers its function into the exhibition space - and perhaps even extends it to the entire space.

The gallery goers might watch with amazement as other visitors, contravening the accepted protocol, enter the work of art, hold on to it, and hide within it – migrants, for example, familiar with the notion of sanctuary, or other fugitives. (Throughout its history, the protection offered by sanctuary was extended to all outlaws, including murderers.)

6

*Sanctuary* represents a striking evolution from Peyser’s show in Venice about a decade ago,

a group of ten free-standing sculptures derived from features of Venice and Venetian life (a bishop, a doge, a high-water platform shoe, etc.). Anthropomorphic in gesturality, stance and size, they were arrayed as if in a gathering or conversation. The sculptor saw the show as invoking diaspora, in the pieces’ own passage by ship from New York, where they were made; in //the Venetians’ own migration from the mainland to form their own city on the islands of the lagoon; the settlement of the Jewish population that has lived in Venice for hundreds of years; and finally, the explosion of migration by land and water from poor to rich countries.

In the Venice show, the human was central. In appearance, construction, and design, the figures were intensely animated and individualized, and to walk among them was like entering a frozen moment in the performance of a play,

In *Sanctuary*, the figures are gone. In their place stands a configuration of cedar posts. The human has been replaced by the architectural, presence by absence, gathering by flight. The difference is jarring, though both works are responses to the same social forces -depredation, poverty and violence.

A radical compression has taken place in Peyser’s approach. The exuberant gesturality and inventiveness that characterized so much of the earlier work is redeployed. The palette of materials is reduced to two: steel and wood. There is none of the submersion in texture, metallurgical puns, the sensuality, attention to surface, rhythm, humor, the games in form and scale. All such animation, all that would have been felt as the human, has been subjected to an extreme extrusion. The ten boisterous figures that in Venice cavorted beneath a Baroque trempe l’oeil ceiling have been drawn down into an obscure alphabet of ten letters of hammered metal lodged like spikes in railroad ties, individualized characters distilled into to repeating units. Of the theatrics of the earlier piece, parodic, ludic, colorful, dynamic what remains is an empty stage - but a stage that reverberates with what or who is missing.

Teddy Jefferson

New York

August 2023