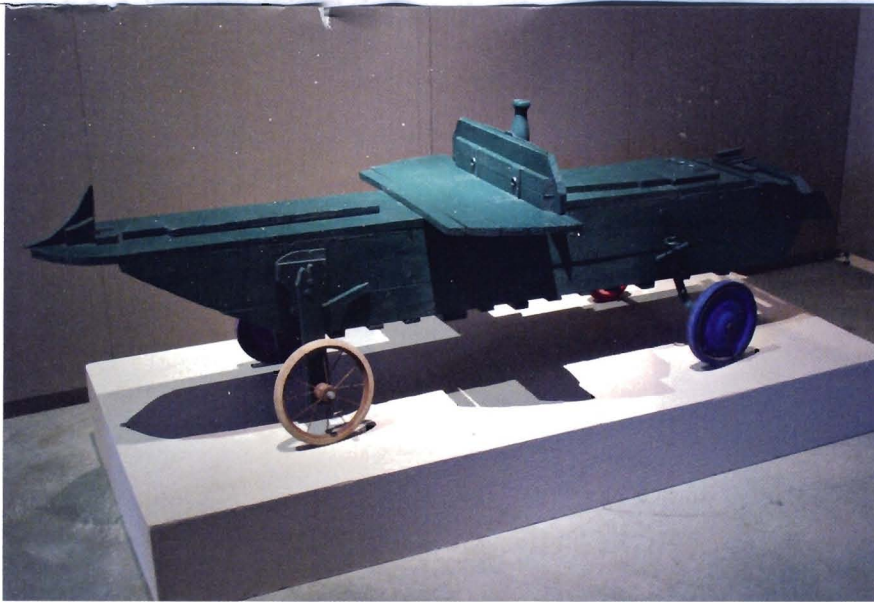




LOIS TEICHER

Private Voice, Public Benefit

Curved Form with Rectangle and Space, 2000.
Powder-coated stainless steel, 14 x 7 ft. 2 views
of work installed in Detroit.



Lois Teicher's *Curved Form with Rectangle and Space* (2000) is just what its title describes, a gently bowed piece of sheet steel rising 14 feet from the ground, painted pure white, with a tall, narrow rectangular space cut out of it just to the right of center. Constructed of a seemingly simple abstract form, on closer inspection, the sculpture reveals the complex nature of individual perception as it responds to object and spatial environment.

Curved Form with Rectangle and Space sits on a small Detroit garden plot surrounded by a circular walkway. It is sited next to the modest Cotswold-style, red brick building of the Scarab Club, a century-old artist's association, and across the street from the recently completed Michael Graves renovation of the Detroit Institute of Arts. Walking around the sculpture, the space of its title frames an inner-city panorama that moves from the grandeur (some might say pretension) of DIA's white, marble-clad exterior to the banality of a parking lot. Each view provides an opportunity to consider questions of the civic ideal and one's place within the built environment. The potential for art to be a channel through which private thoughts enter the public domain has been a major theme of Teicher's work from the beginning. A recent retrospective at the Saginaw Art Museum in Michigan offered an occasion for taking stock of her evolution.

Teicher says that her nearly three decades as an artist have been about the process of discovering her own artistic language. * Entering art school in Detroit as an adult in the mid-1970s, after having raised three children, she found herself negotiating specific imperatives of time and place. On the one hand, there was the broad cultural current of second-wave feminism and, on the other, the more local concerns of a solidifying "Detroit" canon that came to be known as the Cass Corridor style. Teicher's development can be seen as a kind of personal and aesthetic "coming out."

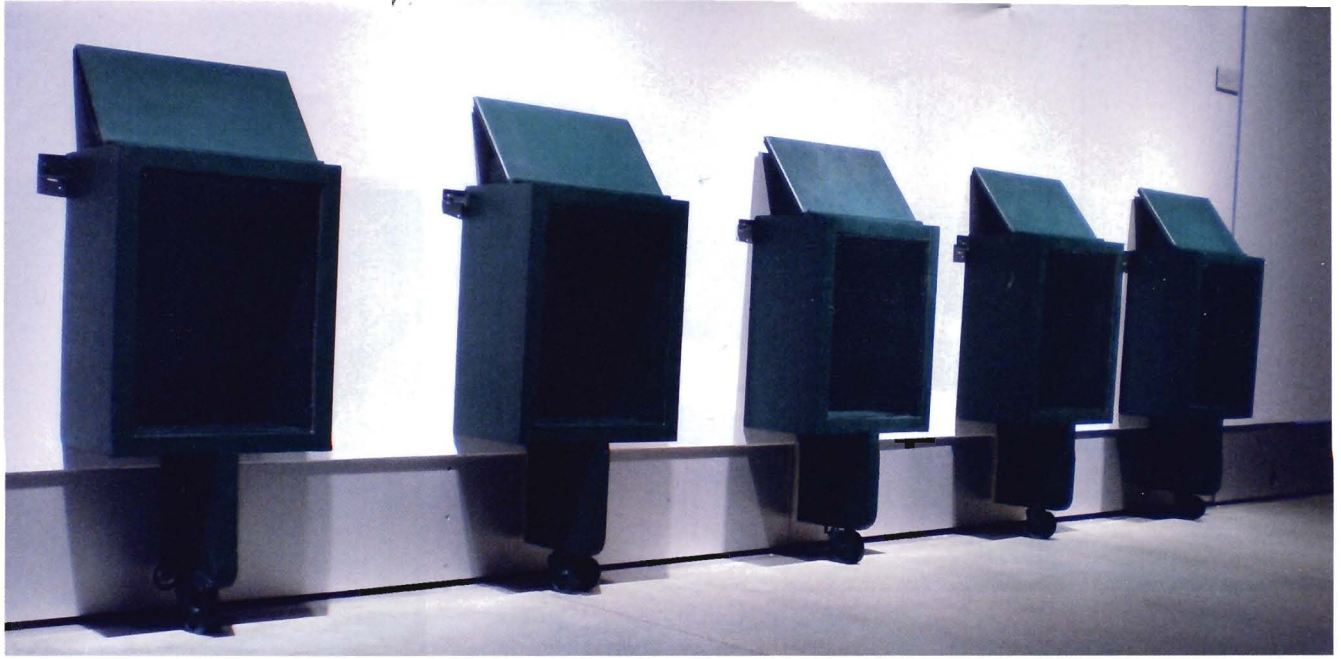
The multi-part *Celebration of Women* (1979) consists of a rough-finished lathwork wall serving as a backdrop for a wooden assemblage that alternately reads like an easel, a stick figure behind a table or countertop (or perhaps an ironing board?), or a cross. The piece pays homage to generations of women whose socially defined positions (as in Teicher's own experience) both inspired and restricted creative enterprise. Constructed from recycled materials, *Celebration* also engaged the prevailing Detroit-style practice of incorporating castoffs into assemblages that reflected the city's post-industrial environment.

The Cass Corridor aesthetic found expression in many of Teicher's early works. *Vehicle Series* (1980) resembles a post-Apocalyptic soapbox derby car. With mismatched wheels and a scrap-wood body rudely held together by found hardware and painted an institutional dark green, it could have been cobbled together from the ruins of an abandoned workshop. And indeed, the tinker (or *bricoleur*, as Postmodernism would have it) is one of the



Left: *Vehicle Series*, 1980. Found wood, 29 x 84 x 20 in. Above: *Celebration of Women*, 1979. Found wood, 84 x 120 x 3.5 in.

most pervasive tropes of the ideal "Detroit" artist. The piece also has an autobiographical component, recalling Teicher's childhood practice of disassembling and re-assembling her bicycle and making things from materials found in the field next to her family's home. Other mixed-media works tilt more toward the mandate of gender identity. For instance, *Drawing with Red Strap* (1983-84), a Styrofoam medallion worked with modeling paste and covered with a drawing, was designed



Top: *I Feel Like a Choreographer*, 1981. Wood, wire mesh, and paint, 5 units, 42 x 16 x 9.75 in. Above: *Observer/Observed*, 1986. Mirrored Plexiglas, Styrofoam, wood, poles, sandbags, water, wooden benches, and plywood, 4 units, 12 x 4 x 2 ft.

to be worn over the artist's mid-section in performances. The drawn imagery of undulating folds and serrated contours can be read as an iconographic manifestation of the vagina dentata. (Teicher describes herself as "a raging feminist" in those years.)

Even in such early works, however, elements of the refined lexicon for which Teicher has come to be known were beginning to emerge. *I Feel Like a Choreographer* (1981) bridges divergent impulses and sets the stage for Teicher's later work. Five green wooden boxes stand upright on individual casters, their front-facing openings covered in wire screen. These components can be reconfigured at every installation to suit their surrounding space. (At the Saginaw museum, the boxes were lined up in a row along a single wall, minding their place as "good" works of art.) More oblique than the overtly feminist or Cass Corridor-influenced works, *I Feel Like a Choreographer* leaves interpretation in the hands of the viewer.

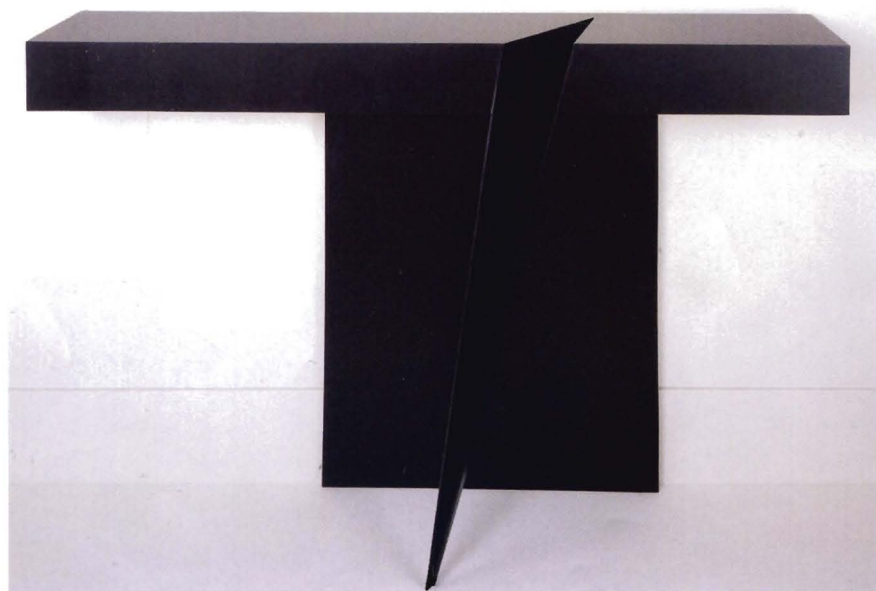
Teicher's mature aesthetic became clearly articulated in *Observer/Observed* (1986), which was created for a temporary show of outdoor sculpture in Chene Park, on the banks of the Detroit River near downtown. The installation featured four mirror-clad monoliths placed in the center of a small pond. Minimalist-inspired seating was arranged around the water's edge, setting up situations for seeing and being seen, both by oneself and by others. *Observer/Observed* embodied what phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in *The Visible and the Invisible*, terms "chiasm"—the threshold between subjectivity and objectivity and the reciprocity (or "reversibility," as he calls it) that connects the two, the existential condition of being-in-the-world under which one experiences the reality of self and otherness in the flesh. Exposing the physical and metaphysical parameters of the field of being is one of art's primary functions according to Merleau-Ponty; it brings together material form and expressive content in a made thing that communicates a relationship to the world in a unique way.

Teicher's mature work—especially the public sculpture that has preoccupied her for the last decade—has continued to explore the geometric forms and simple palette of *Observer/Observed*, along with questions of creator and audience. Teicher is one of the most prolific public sculptors working in Michigan, and she is deeply committed to the idea of art as a public thing, something meant to engage viewers of all kinds, not just the privileged few.

Her first major public commission, for Bishop International Airport (1996) in Flint, Michigan, established a pattern of distilling an essential visual language to communicate with broad audiences. *Paper Airplane Series with Deep Groove* (1996) is simple enough. It consists of three sheets of steel folded and painted to look like paper airplanes and placed throughout the airport as if they had just landed after being tossed by a giant child. The largest sits on the floor of the main concourse. Painted white with light blue lines like ruled paper, it even has binder holes punched into the tail edge. The casual whimsy of the piece belies its 3,600 pounds. Another plane is painted yellow to mimic the signage above the main entrance, and a smaller blue one teeters off the edge of a ledge.



Left: *Wedge with Wedge with Wedge*, 1995. Welded aluminum, 7 x 5 x 2 ft. Below: *Function/Non-function*, 1997. Welded aluminum, 60 x 39 x 11 in.



Metaphor (2006) was commissioned for the State of Michigan Mass Transit Authority training center in Grand Blanc, just south of Flint. It uses images taken from everyday traffic signs. The forms are stylized and integrated into a dynamic composition that optimistically considers the possibilities of education in the public interest.

All along, Teicher has maintained a studio practice while completing her numerous private commissions. *Wedge with Wedge with Wedge* (1995) is an excellent example of her explorations of pure sculptural form. Fabricated of welded aluminum painted a velvety soft black, it stands seven feet tall and leans against the wall. The first wedge refers to the right-hand section of the form; the second to a notch cut into the forward-facing plane, which is wider at the top and narrows to a point as it nears the base. The third wedge defines the sculpture's overall mass, which tapers in depth from wider at the base to narrower at the top. With an economy of means, sculpture's essence as spatial container and kinetic volume is revealed. Teicher has also executed numerous works that investigate the ostensible dichotomy of form and function. *Half and Half Table* (1996), for example, consists of two narrow triangles that sit side by side to make up the rectangular shape of the tabletop. One half is about form as enclosure of space and the other about form as figure.

Although it might not seem obvious from her mature work, Teicher remains an unabashed feminist. It should go without saying (though it too often doesn't) that, in an equitable world, the work would be all that matters. Second-wave feminists used to say that the personal is political. For Teicher, it is aesthetic, too.



Note

* All references are taken from personal communication with the artist, published artist's statements, or the documentary video *Lois Teicher: The Journey* (2008).