

THE GREAT OUTDOORS
BY ARLENE RAVEN
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(about a community of Shelter)

Manhattan (melting space in a way Thoreau never dreamed) contains public art of every description. A homeless soul lies at the heart of collective urban humankind: so much so that those finding shelter at Madison Square garden and the Port Authority had to be banished from the sight of the Democratic convention in order to erase the social realism of the city. Downtown in Thomas Paine Park, near the Civic Center, Nancy Cohen's A Community of Shelter (a splendid site installation of six sculptures low to the ground, tied to trees with rope) makes references to local citizenry and sanctuary. Large-scale elements, including shells, pods, and a nest, most covered with adobe, allude to natural forms.

Cohen appreciates the urban shelters at the periphery of the park invented by New York City homeless as a necessity for survival within the resources of their physical environment. A corrugated cardboard rectangle that somebody calls home rests a few yards from Cohen's almost identical silhouette—a steel box of welded metal filled with industrial cast-offs such as plastic tubes, electronic cables, and computer boards. Through intentional imitation, she pays homage to the ingenuity and economy of homeless builders.

The relationship between art and morality, like those between idealism and consensus, are at their most intense when applied to works of contemporary public art. Yet these philosophical and ethical relationships are also at their most tenuous in the situation of art that has been placed in the midst of, created especially for, or made in the name of, a community. This is true because art needs to be both strong and vulnerable. Art in the completely public arena, more so than work in museums, is mortal.