

"Formant: Forms of
Listening to Forms"
Colby Caldwell

Charles Long

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Charles Long, *Pet Sounds* (detail), 2012, mixed media, dimensions variable.

For *Pet Sounds* at Madison Square Park, California-based artist Charles Long has installed an interactive installation consisting of colored pipe railings. The project was organized by Madison Square Park Conservancy and will be on view until September 9, 2012.

I WANTED TO CREATE SOMETHING THAT PEOPLE WOULD LOVE. An artist can use the invitation to make public work as an opportunity to critique mass consumerism, but that kind of critical relationship does not appeal to me. What led me to the idea for *Pet Sounds* was in fact my connection to pop culture. The title of my project is also the title of the Beach Boys' 1966 album, which profoundly affected me as an artist. For me, Brian Wilson's songs combine the aesthetic complexity of high art with a universal appeal that fosters an unabashedly human connection between the work and the listener. My sight-specific installation *Pet Sounds* pays tribute to the Beach Boys, but it is foremost a way to enchant the park and stimulate its community in my own way.

I've been going to Madison Square Park regularly for several years and have spent a great deal of time trying out ideas and considering the best way to integrate my art into this public space. People really use the park to do their own thing, be it reading, sleeping, eating, or meeting friends. Ultimately, I wanted to create a work that enhanced the experience of the park—in terms of how people enjoy and use this outdoor public space on a daily basis. I didn't want to make a sculpture for the park as much as I wanted to extend the park itself into some kind of fantasy of sculpture.

What developed was a system of vivid colored railings defining pathways that spill out onto the great lawn leading one to a surreal park-within-a-park. As the rails converge around a tree, they grow into human-scaled amorphous blobs lounging on benches and plopping down on a picnic table. During my research, I made drawings and photos of people and animals in the park and wanted to transcribe these images into three-dimensional abstract forms that would create a somatic relationship between the installation and visitors. Whether a particular sculpture appears birdlike, doglike, or humanlike—each is open for interpretation—the forms absolutely connect to the physical and biological aspects of park.

There is a tactile and audible component to *Pet Sounds*. The skins of the blobs are sensitized so that as one smooths a hand over the surface, there is an instantaneous response: The entire surface vibrates, producing a range of sounds. It's fun to see all these hands groping the forms and visitors discovering the acoustic element. I notice a lot of dialogue between visitors, as multiple people can play together on the same form.

I wanted people to connect to these blobs and be affected in a strange abstract way, so their bodylike scale contrasts an elusive figuration. You can't place it, but you seem to recall it. The slippery skins are so smooth, undulating, and synthetically sexy that they beckon you to caress them. Art is seldom something people can touch. In the open-ended public space of the park I chose to make touch essential and connection more likely.

— As told to Mara Hoberman

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