



SCALING PUBLIC SPACE



Janet Echelman

BY PATRICIA C. PHILLIPS

Opposite and above: *Her secret is patience*, 2009. Painted galvanized steel and cables, recyclable high-tenacity polyester braided twine netting, and colored lighting with computerized programming, 145 x 100 ft. Work installed in Phoenix, AZ.

CRAIG SMITH

How might we begin to count the ways to be public? How do we categorize the different experiences and encounters of the dynamic connections between individual subjectivity and transitory collectivity that characterize the shifting dimensions of the public realm? To be public is to exist within flexible, frequently concurrent skeins of scales and conventions that are often intimate and detailed, on the one hand, and vast and swarm-like, on the other. Each one of us lives—and continually interprets and reinterprets our roles—within these shifting configurations and scales of public. In the essay “Practices of Space,” Michel de Certeau explores the totalizing view and more granular impressions of human activity, the “above” and the “down,” of urban scopic experiences. He begins his text at the top of the World Trade Center and beholds the oceanic expanse of New York City. It is an empowering, panoramic view—at once comprehensive yet devoid of details, textures, or vagaries to arrest one’s vision. If not entirely featureless, its awesome scope is largely characterless: “One’s body is no longer criss-crossed by the streets that bind and re-bind it...”¹ If the World Trade Center now only exists as a phantom of loss and trauma, the idea of a panoptic observation deck, with its prospect of sweeping oversight, remains a captivating seduction.

de Certeau also descends into the city's streets, where his text becomes as dynamic and textured, wavering and surging, as the people whom he passes and observes. At this more intimate, immediate, and intensive scale, people negotiate the city with their bodies, planned routes, and spontaneous digressions to create a strikingly different textuality of the city—and its publics and spaces. If the panoramic overlook offers epic descriptive moments, the activity on the streets, with its optimistic, ungovernable tactical potential, offers vivid, embodied inscriptive representations of the city. The walking and writing of the city is endlessly unpredictable and predictably endless. The experiences of scales and scopic conventions of public life that de Certeau describes, and we routinely participate in and witness, are just as urgent today; and artists, who work in the public sphere, are compelled to embrace or acknowledge these contrasting realities.

Janet Echelman's growing body of conceptually and technically ambitious work—knowingly never fully formed, intricate and expansive, ambient and restive, above and below—represents some ways that we might think about the public spaces and scales in which much public art is developed and deployed. Her indirect path to these sculptures is distinctive and independent, multiple and arboreal. She is a concert pianist who paints, a painter who studied psychology, and a psychologist who has become a deeply accomplished, risk-taking artist. Formed by the intimate, painstaking traditions of lace-making, knitting, and knotting and driven by a voracious curiosity, Echelman now frequently works with legions of collaborators—architects, landscape architects,



aeronautical engineers, and fabricators—to make enormous works that also encompass and represent the small gestures or, what de Certeau describes as the “cursives and strokes,” of people in the city. Most of what she makes requires, at the very least, an active bifocality on the part of viewers that shifts from abstraction to representation, materiality to atmospherics, and general, if not entirely discernible, forms to a dense, sinewy grammar of interlocking lines. Like the repetitious, serial, accretive, and ingenious technical processes required to create the work, perception and experience are additive and assembled. In some respects, the work is never complete—nor entirely seen.

Echelman's work may be another element or example of a contemporary preoccupation with “invisible culture” that has become a stimulus for artists and viewers. Invisibility is about disappearance and withholding—the unavailable or not there. But things also

More than you can chew, 1997. Cast bronze, silk, cotton net, Bhandini-dyed silk, and galvanized steel, 50 x 105 x 105 ft. From the “Bellbottoms Series.”

Journeys toward Sculpture

BY JANET ECHELMAN

In 1989, I traveled to the island of Borneo with Robert Rauschenberg, his companion, and his photographer. Once we arrived, we made our way upriver by small open boat to a Longhouse where the tribal chief sacrificed a chicken to welcome us (we were told something about spilling the animal's blood so that our blood need not be spilt). We spent the night inside the Longhouse, on

the floor of the chief's rooms; in front of the door hung three human skulls (we were told that they belonged to his father and that cannibalism was no longer practiced).

At the time, I was a 22-year-old artist who had moved on my own to Bali, Indonesia, after college. I had just been hired as the Southeast Asian Regional Coordinator by the Rauschenberg Over-



Playpen/Suckle bell buckle, 1997. Cast bronze, hand-knotted net, block-printed silk, and galvanized steel, 65 x 11 x 11 in. From the “Bellbottoms Series.”

neatly fit into either of these ideas of invisibility; instead, it suggests a calculated unperceivability derived from never fully seeing—never locking in on a stable, identifiable image. Like our experience of clouds or sudden meteorological events, perception is phenomenological rather than visual, but a lasting impression can be tenacious—if never fully fixed.

In 1997–98, Echelman went to India on a Fulbright Senior Lectureship. She arrived as a painter, but returned to the United States with a very different developing art practice. While living in a coastal town, she watched fishermen maneuvering nets that could be condensed into a solid form or unfolded to create expansive, undulating, and submerged spaces to ensnare fish. The shifting scales, densities, and endless configurations of net-like structures have influenced many other artists. Their assembly and structure connect to other traditions of handwork, labor, adaptability, and contingency. Instead of efficient, water-based entrapments, Echelman saw the potential for a series of suspended and buoyant airborne structures, animated by winds rather than waves. In the “Bellbottoms Series” (1997), which she made and presented in Mahaballipuram, India, Echelman whimsically combined the traditions of morphology and assembly of fishing nets with aesthetic ambitions and performative potential. The hand-knotted works with block-printed silk, cast bronze, and galvanized steel darted and pulsed overhead, enacting their odd, beguiling monikers (*More than you can chew*, *Red hot*, and *Playpen/Suckle bell buckle*). These modest, quirky pieces were the pilot projects for the substantial, international practice that she has developed over the past 10 years.

become invisible through ubiquity, by being so dramatically commonplace that they drift from consciousness—the there not. Echelman’s work doesn’t

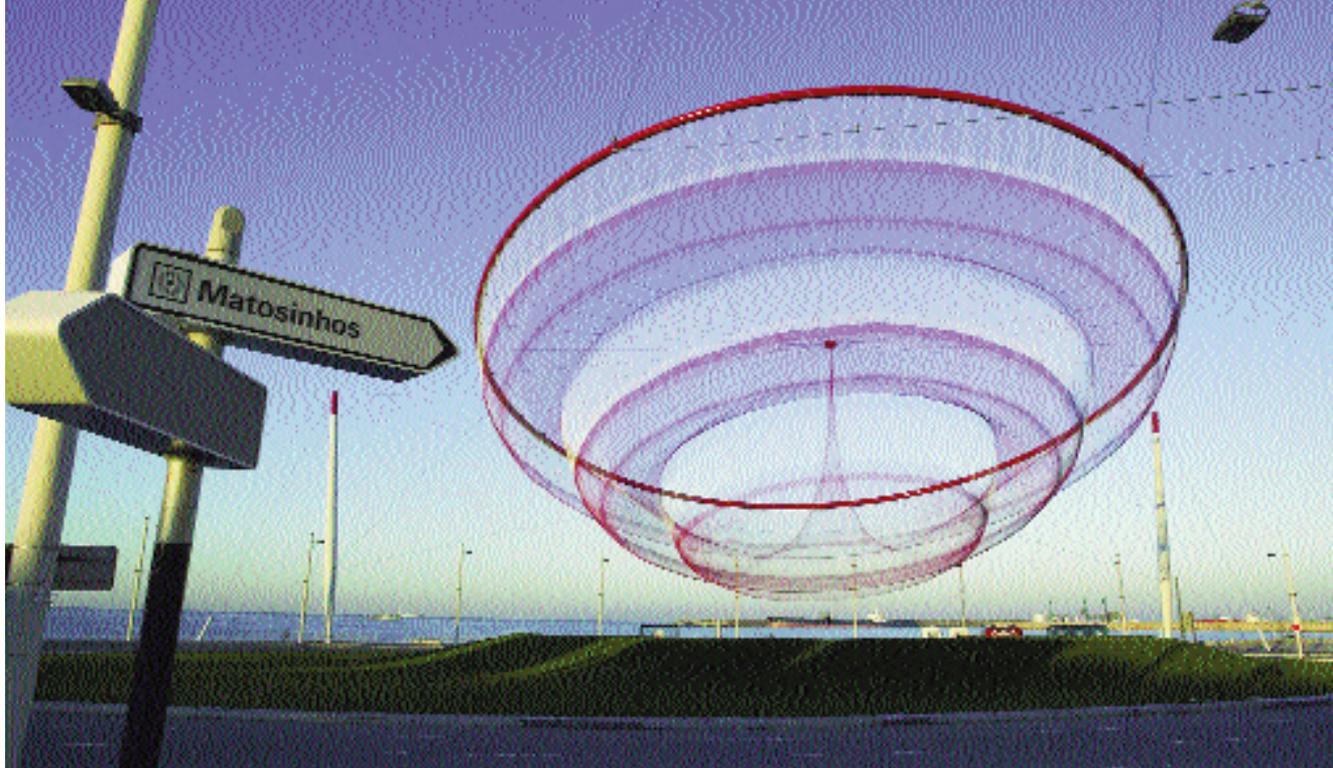
In addition to the inflationary scale of her recent work, Echelman has pursued a series of formal, constructive, and technical concerns in conjunction with an attention to the public realm. How do her apparently endlessly modifiable, mutable works connect to and represent shared spaces and experiences? One of her most striking projects was commissioned by the Portuguese government (Polis Program) for the beachfront cities of Porto and Matosinhos, Portugal. The immediate site is a public, but generally unpopulated, pristine oval of green grass with a sunken, crater-like center designed by the artist with architect Eduardo Souto de Moura. The area is surrounded by a three-lane highway roundabout. The Atlantic Ocean is just across the thoroughfare. If these are the local characteristics, the actual site of operation for Echelman’s huge, hovering sculpture is more far-flung. Using a sophisticated architectural fiber woven to structural hoops to form a pliable conical shape, *She Changes* (2005) sways and swaggers 50 meters above

seas Culture Interchange (ROCI). My job was to help set up Rauschenberg’s exhibition at the Malaysian National Museum and then to arrange this trip so Bob could see the local culture and create a new series of artworks relating to Malaysia. My art history studies had only taken me up to World War II and Abstract Expressionism, and my naiveté as to the breadth and importance of Bob’s work is probably what enabled me to do the job.

I helped him to negotiate the Malaysian markets and various rickshaws and taxi-cabs, observing carefully what he chose to

photograph and what he brought back for collage—markers of the place’s visual language. While flying over Malaysia in a helicopter, I remember Bob photographing the changing colors in the landscape and learning that the brown was the result of erosion muddying the rivers due to deforestation while the green, which was over the border in Brunei, indicated forests—wealthy Brunei did not need to cut down its trees. I began to understand how visual language could tell a story.

Most of all, I remember discovering Bob’s work as the exhibition crates were opened one by one at the museum and marveling at



the green island—visible well beyond the scale and dimensions of the site.

The work is never at rest and activated by an unseen phenomenon—another way that Echelman plays with and skirts invisibility, spectacle, and changing experiences of the public realm. The movement of the netted, porous fiber form is determined by ocean breezes, so that it enacts an invisible force that can produce welcome relief (the breeze on a hot, humid afternoon) or shocking mayhem (the whipping currents of a tornado or hurricane). While Echelman refers to her process as “wind choreography,” it is a “composition” without beginning, conclusion, or clearly discernible pattern. Unlike a sail with its largely unbroken planar surface, the pliable skin of this hollow form is surface and sieve, solid and void. The dynamics of resistance and passage create an enigmatic, sensual undulation that responds to the wind and invokes the movement of sea

anemones and other floating creatures in fluvial environments. Its response to the wind creates an endlessly unsettled and riveting imperfectability. *She Changes* and changes and changes. The form is never fully apprehended, but slowly develops an ensemble of indelible characteristics.

If wind, light, and other elements and site conditions govern Echelman’s outdoor work, her interior installations and projects play on other instabilities and ambiguities. For “Radical Lace and Subversive Knitting” at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York, she installed *The Expanding Club* (2007) in the hollow center of the building’s stairway. Made of knotted nylon net with steel fittings, the colorful form seemed both insubstantial and yet susceptible to great forces of gravity. A narrow central stem extended up to unfurl into a big, billowy, cloud-like cap. In silhouette, it unmistakably referenced the chaotic, catastrophic residual of a nuclear explosion. Echelman further fixed this alarming association with a color palette derived from the flags of nations and countries that have detonated atomic bombs (United States, Soviet Union [Russia], United Kingdom, France, China, India, Pakistan, and North Korea). With the global proliferation of nuclear capability, Echelman’s downward and upward, slouching and explosive, chilling yet beguiling chandelier of knots and string rendered a particularly ominous pandemic crisis.

In *Line Drawing* (2006–07), Echelman calculatedly chose the dark, cave-like site of an urban parking garage to stretch and distort conventional ideas of interiority. A parking garage is generally so unobvious, unseen, and banal that people’s commonplace disinterest registers another kind of invisibility. Commissioned by the Tampa Public Art initia-

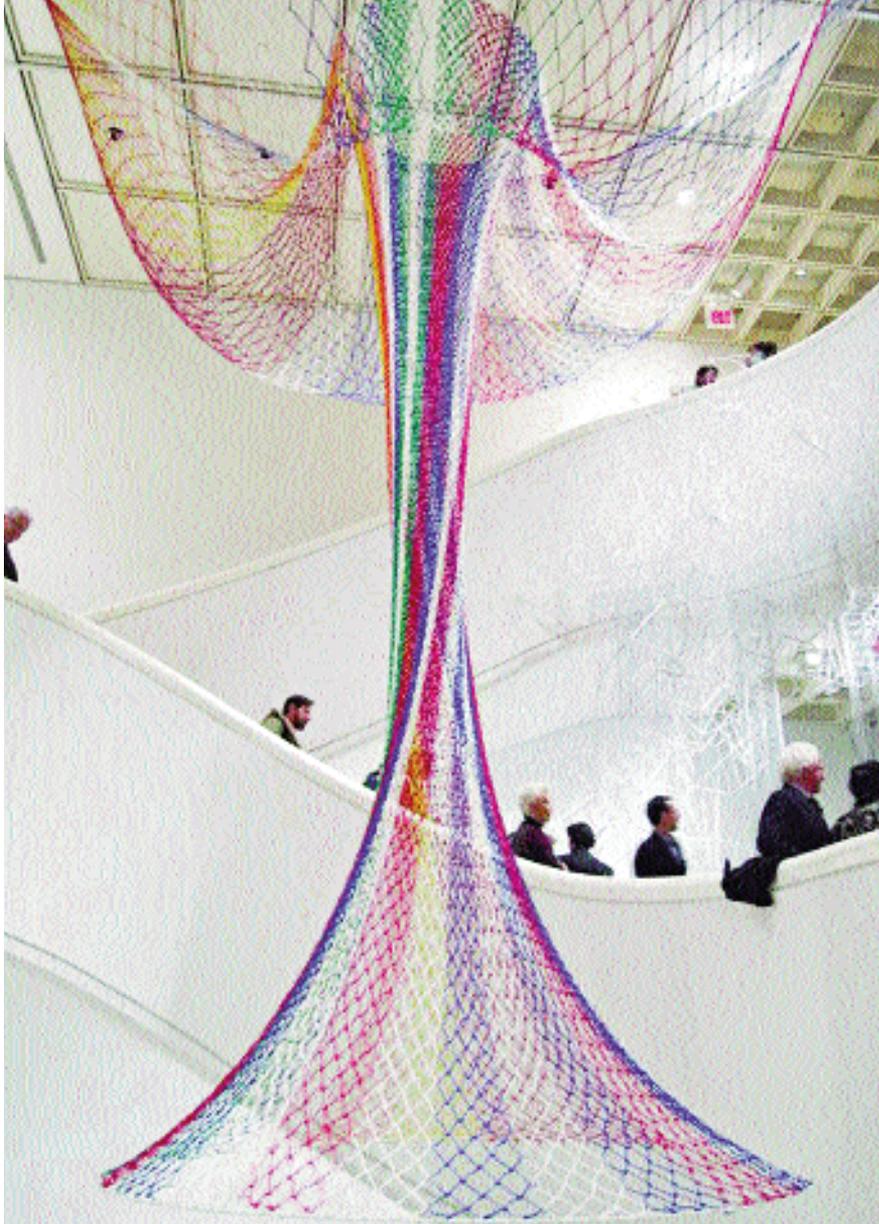
She Changes, 2005. Tenara® PTFE architectural fiber, 50 x 150 x 150 meters. Work installed at Waterfront Plaza, Porto and Matosinhos, Portugal.

the sheer bravado of materials and invention in metals, textiles, ceramics, wood, and paint. Drifting between wall and freestanding objects and back again, there were multi-layered textile works with woven Ikat fabrics from Samarkand and a series of sewn works with translucent layers of fabric called “Hoarfrost.” I was enthralled. It was a delight to meet these works face to face, just like one meets a person for the first time.

Never did I imagine that the trip would end with Bob asking to see slides of my own work, images of me holding up large, loose, batik-dyed canvases with partially painted, abstract surfaces. He

subsequently asked me if I would let him curate a solo exhibition of my work back in the United States.

He did curate that exhibition, which featured two dozen of my works from Bali, including two freestanding works in the shape of Balinese ceremonial flags and more than a dozen batik-acrylic paintings. For the exhibition, I stretched the canvases onto wooden stretcher bars, like standard paintings. Bob took me aside to say, “You see how your flags move gently in the passing breeze, even indoors like this? If you take your other works off those stretchers, they will begin to respond, even to the small changes in a room.”



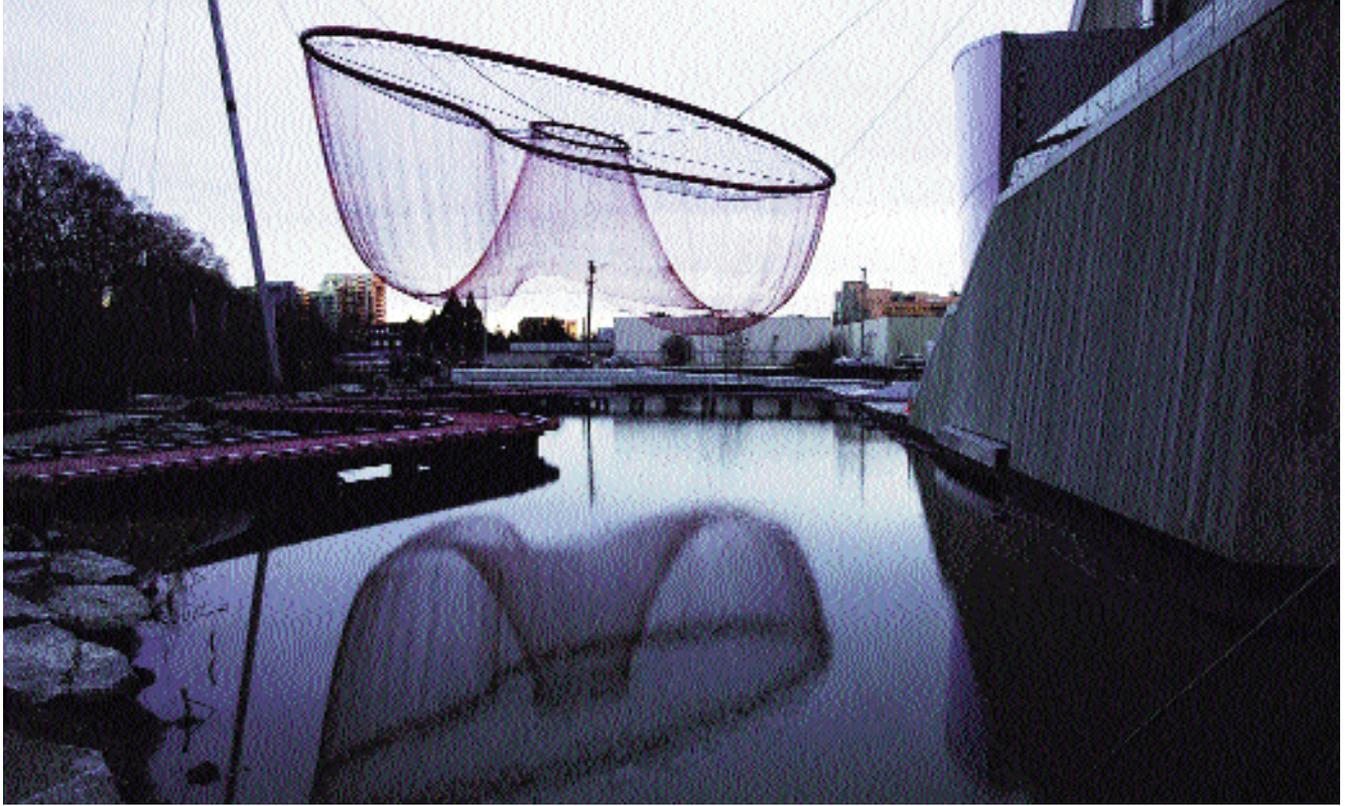
Left: *The Expanding Club*, 2007. Hand-knotted nylon net and steel fittings, view of installation at Museum of Arts and Design, NY. Above: *Target swooping down*, 2001. Hand-knotted nylon net, 45 x 135 ft. diameter.

tive “Lights on Tampa,” Echelman’s project was one of a series of temporary, light-based projects designed to enliven downtown after dark, when the workforce empties out and leaves the area vacant. (I witnessed this flight and sense of abandonment when I served as one of three jurors for the project.) *Line Drawing* was a loopy web of multi-filament polypropylene loosely strung and suspended from the ceiling of the Poe Parking Garage. If this was not sufficiently ungainly and uncanny, the experience of the undulating network overhead was like reading the lines of a topographic map in reverse. Mountains, valleys, depressions, and great draping bulges appeared in opposition to the logic of gravity.

Since the project was for “Lights on Tampa,” a series of ellipsoidal spotlights with colored filters created an eerie glow in the concrete chamber and cast an attenuated, oblique shadow twin of the overhead net on the far wall. If not bluntly ironic, *Line Drawing* was at least wry. The Poe Parking Garage was built for commuters who drive from their suburban homes to the parking garage, hurry to nearby offices, and reverse engineer their movements to escape the city at the end of the day. It was a shrewd scheme to dramatically—and ephemerally—exoticize the dulling typology of the automobile warehouse. I imagine that Echelman understood, exploited, and probably enjoyed all of the oddities of the situation, even if sobered by heavy responsibilities and unrealistic expectations placed on artists and art to remedy complex urban problems.

More than a decade later, I remembered his words when considering my first attempts at sculpture, produced while teaching on a Fulbright in India—three-dimensional forms made of netting and cloth flapping in the wind on the beach. I had gone to teach painting at the National Institute of Design and had shipped all of my “academic materials” (gallons of paint) through the diplomatic pouch. I had promised the American Consulate to present an exhibition at the end of my grant and was waiting for my paints to arrive in order to begin.

In the meantime, I explored local traditions, from vegetable dyes to fabric, various resist methods, even chair-caning. I then went south to Tamil Nadu, and faced with the reality that my paints were unlikely to arrive, I took up lost-wax bronze casting. The village of Mahaballipuram, where I was staying, had a 1,000-year-old tradition of sculpture, so it made sense to embrace the local culture. It was now less than two months before the opening of my exhibition, and I had only 12 small bronzes that could each fit into the palm of my hand. The exhibition space was quite large, and I didn’t have the money or the metal to extend the bronze pieces.



Over the past two years, Echelman has been working on two of her most ambitious projects. In Phoenix, Arizona, she recently completed a project for a large civic park adjacent to the Arizona State University campus, one of the fastest growing universities in the nation. It is a large, increasingly cosmopolitan municipal site. In addition to its relationship to the campus, the park is sited between two light rail systems. Echelman was brought in to work with the existing conditions and to help address the inevitable tensions and extract the potentialities produced by competing needs and expectations.

Her project is a blue, bowl-shaped, diaphanous web suspended high over the site.² Like a number of her other works, *Her secret is patience* (2009) is sensitive to the wind and responds to and continuously scores (with both melodic and percussive moments) the changing conditions on the site. As Echelman suggests,

That evening, I went to the beach for a walk and a swim, as I'd done every evening after work at the foundry, and I watched the fishermen bringing in their nets. The nets were large rounded forms dotting the shore, and I remember thinking, "There is volumetric space without weight, without mass." These adaptable nets could be a strategy for defining monumental forms that would later fold up into small light containers. The next day I made some sketches, drilled holes around the edges of each of my tiny bronzes, and walked down to the beach with my friend

the materials and engineering produce a sensation of embodied movement like breathing—an endless cycle of inhalations and exhalations, expansion and contraction. Beneath the enormous, yet seemingly immaterial and intangible form, 20 light poles are programmed with color patterns that change seasonally. Their rhythmic orchestration introduces another character of movement and temporality.

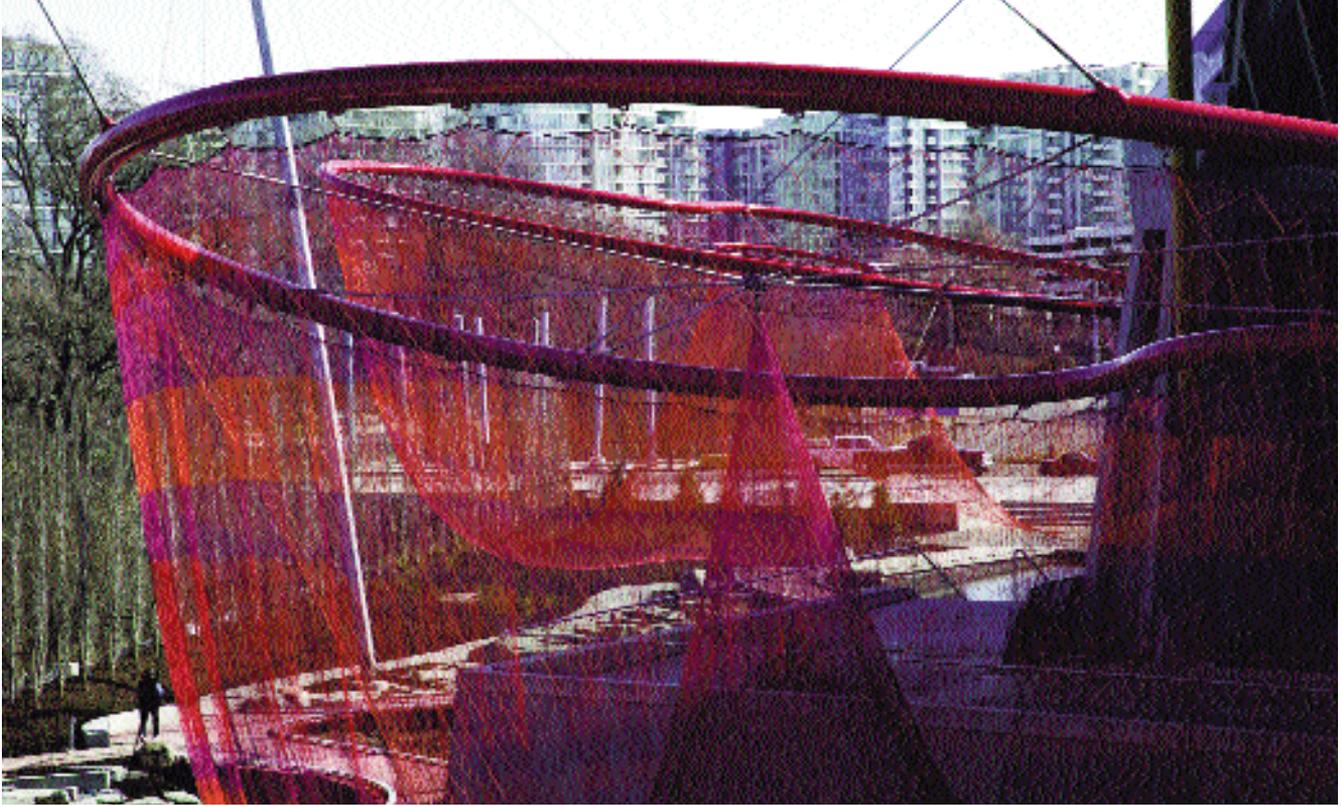
Hovering nearly 100 feet above the new Phoenix Civic Space, the moving blue form serves as a coordinate and marker—a point in space from which people, from a great distance, can situate and navigate. I imagine that readings of the project will evolve—as they generally do in public art projects. Like Echelman's other work, *Her secret is patience* is neither entirely bewildering nor benign, neither fully formed nor dependably apprehended. Whether meteorological or nuclear, the suggestion of unidentifiable imminence is a quiet, resonant chord. Its sensitive choreography in the desert winds, ultimately, may offer more pleasing, if enigmatic, associations. Echelman anticipates that the dynamic qualities of the project will serve as a summons or magnetic force to create a center that does hold.

Her other major project in North America is *Water Sky Garden* at the Richmond Olympic Oval in British Columbia, Canada.³ Commissioned for the 2010 Vancouver Olympic Winter Games by the City of Richmond, Echelman worked with a large urban design team of architects, engineers, landscape architects, and public art consultants. As in Phoenix,

to ask some of the fishing families if they would knot a net for me in the shapes I had drawn. Then I took the mosquito netting that I had been sleeping under, together with my sketches, up the street to the local tailors. I was told that all the fishermen were Hindu and all the tailors were Muslim, yet we had the village working together with this American outsider producing a dozen "things," which nobody imagined to be sculpture at all.

Based on an interview with landscape architect Suzanne Ernst.

Above and opposite: *Water Sky Garden*, 2009. Painted galvanized steel, braided GORE™ TERNARA® architectural fiber net, cedar, water-aeration system, plants, and lighting, total area approx. 75,000 sq. ft. Work installed in Richmond, British Columbia.



Echelman's role has expanded and descended from the sky above to include the ground below. For this complex site, she has developed an intertissued concept to create a navigable, civic space responsive to wind, light, and environmental conditions, as well as to Richmond's diverse inhabitants. From the ground up, the many dimensions of the project create an active, yet reflective public space that functionally connects outlying parking areas with the architecture of the Olympic site, as well as the waterfront of the Fraser River. En route, pedestrians encounter red cedar paths with connecting bridges that form a meandering passage through a tranquil, but hard-working garden whose fountain and plantings serve as a wetland treatment area for storm water retention, water quality treatment, and water storage for irrigation. The ongoing aeration process that takes place in the water produces tremulous, bubbling, constantly changing drawings. Many of the design and material elements of the garden refer to the large Asian population in the Richmond area. The path invokes the Chinese Dragon Dance. The Japanese and Chinese gardens of the Vancouver area resonate in the quiet tonalities and sensibility of the design.

Suspended above the garden are netted, bowl-shaped, red forms that Echelman calls "sky lanterns." The lanterns reference the fishing nets still used by the native Musqueam Band in the Fraser River. They create a limpid chain of changing visual effects that link to the garden and water below. The design process for the nets used 3-D sketching and new computer software to build the unique geometry. Computerized looms simulated the craft qualities of hand-work. The movement of the water refracts the light cast on the wind-responsive translucent volumes overhead, producing endless variables and effects. With this project, which recently opened to the public, Echelman vividly and sensitively connects her usual airborne art with the ground below to create an unusually immersive experience.

Art in the public realm is a tenuous, often temporary, connective tissue linking creative collaborators, artists and communities, different constituencies and members of the public, and the work and its context. If we wanted to hypothetically diagram what the public looks like at any given moment, Echelman's work might be an applicable model. Like a large swarm of people, the work is frequently large and approximately perceived from a generalizing distance. But a granular reading of the intricate, networked structures of lines, knots, and hollows represents a more intimate, immediate, and indeterminate idea of public. In addition to the work's contrasting scalar capacities, its constitutively reactive, restless, and partially visible character offers a metaphor for the incalculable conditions

of art in the public realm and the wavering character of public life. Echelman's work has a striking material and physical character, but it is formed, deformed, and reformed by the vagaries and often unseen facts and forces of its site. It reads and articulates site and invites our own readings—and re-readings—of those shimmering, inscriptive surfaces. Light, wind, water, time of day or year, and members of the public form the work and shape individual perceptions. This is strikingly co-dependent work—something that this keenly intelligent artist enterprisingly enables.

Notes

¹ Michel de Certeau, "Practices of Space," in Marshall Blonsky, *On Signs* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1985), p. 122–45.

² The design and fabrication team consisted of Buro Happold, net engineering; Peter Heppel Associates, aeronautical engineering; Speranza Architecture, consultant; CAID Industries, fabricator and project engineering; M3 Engineering, steel structure engineering; Paul Deeb, VOX, lighting; Nexus Steel, structural erection; Foresite Design and Construction, sculptural foundations; Diamond Nets, net fabrication; and NETServices, net installation.

³ The design team includes Phillips Farevaag Smallemberg, landscape architecture; Hotson Bakker Boniface Haden, architects and urbanists; Buro Happold, net engineering; Peter Heppel Associates, aeronautical engineering; Fast + Epp, structural engineering; Speranza Architecture, consultant; Cole Brown Henry Consulting, public art consultants; Vince Helton and Associates, fountain mechanical; and Joseph Scott, lighting design.

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