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Signs

&

A Conversation with **Karin Giusti**

Symbols

by D. Dominick Lombardi

Karin Giusti makes billboards. But not in the traditional sense, with images and words. Her billboards are roadside sculptures—familiar objects that challenge the preconceived notions of passersby. Giusti wants us to think about the genesis of an object's symbolic meaning: how something like a rabbit's foot can symbolize luck. Or, how many of us, at one time or another, counted on the powers of a wishbone for something we really wanted. Giusti received an MFA in sculpture from Yale University, and she is now the head of the sculpture department at Brooklyn College (CUNY). The recipient of numerous grants and awards, including a Guggenheim Fellowship (1997–98), a New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship in Architecture + Environmental Studies, and a Virginia A. Groot Foundation Award (both 2002), Giusti will have her next solo exhibition at Christopher Cerra Space in Dallas in 2004.

D. Dominick Lombardi: *At first glance, some might think of your style as Pop.*

Karin Giusti: My work may look like Pop sculpture; however, I see it as more in line with symbolic representation, such as a sign or billboard. I also see

White House/Green House (detail), 1996. Steel frame, painted Plexiglas and vinyl, 200 rose bushes, and voter registration table, 15 x 40 x 14 ft.

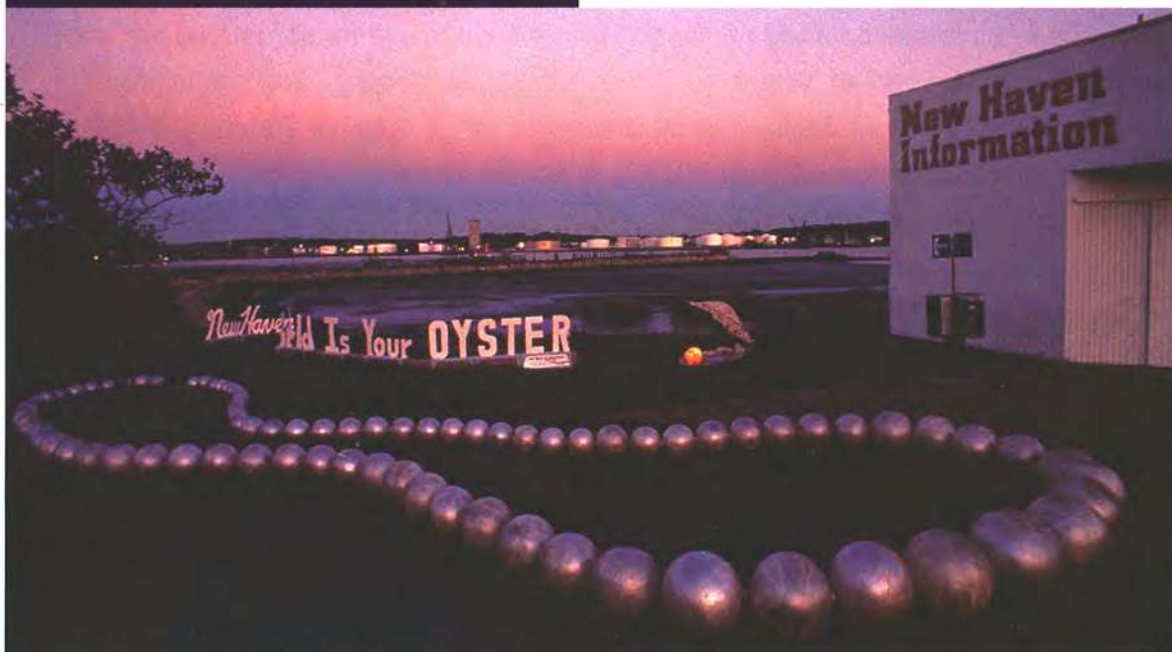
my work as symbolic gesture in the form of a complex group of symbols—objects that culminate together, making or inspiring some sort of action. For instance, in *White House/Green House* there are several symbols (the White House, a greenhouse, roses) coming together to culminate in an action, growing roses.

DDL: *It's as if the viewer completes the thought.*

KG: The intent of my work is to function symbolically, which is the art of communication. I'm



Above: *White House/Green House*, 1996. Steel frame, painted Plexiglas and vinyl, 200 rose bushes, and voter registration table, 15 x 40 x 14 ft. Bottom and detail: *The World is Your Oyster*, 1990. Multi-part installation at the New Haven Harbor Information Booth. Mixed-media and fiberglass animation oyster; steel sign, 3 x 50 ft; and fiberglass pearls with bronze clasp, 3 x 150 ft.



prompting the general public to interact and participate in the formation of the sign. Sometimes my pieces develop over time and are the product of a general consensus on the symbolism. The viewer becomes the contributor.

DDL: *Are the roses in White House/Green House the end product?*

KG: They are part of a mathematical formula, like a symbolic logic equation, but viewers put the symbols together as they see fit, based on their individual experiences and backgrounds.

DDL: *What do the roses symbolize for you?*

KG: I think the rose symbolizes a flourishing or, for that matter, any growing process. If you plant a seed, you get a flower. The rose itself could be substituted by another proposition. In *White House/Green House* it's more about the relationship of the symbols to each other: the White House equals politics; then the dollar bill is money; then the greenhouse becomes about alternative energy, with the symbolic gesture of bringing something to fruition. However, I try to leave it open so that viewers can come to their own conclusions. This way, the viewer at least has the potential to respond to the piece, which fits into the classic idea of the billboard.

DDL: *Viewers may begin to wonder if the message is positive or negative.*

KG: It's loaded imagery. I remember that there were a number of foreign tourists who visited *White House/Green House* in Battery Park, New York. They were most intrigued by the 50-foot dollar bill. They thought it was hilarious. But I was surprised that many visitors embraced the symbolism so wholeheartedly. They treated the greenhouse as if it were the White House. They would go inside, but not one rose was picked. There was a certain reverence for it. In fact, there were

some veterans who took it upon themselves to guard it. This was before 9/11.

DDL: *What about the rabbit's foot pieces? They are roughly six feet tall.*

KG: They are meant as a billboard ad promoting an arts lottery in New York City. They don't function as individual pieces, they're meant to initiate public dialogue. Britain and Ireland already have successful arts lotteries, and we need one too. My most recent billboard, *Ticket to Par-o-Dise*, was done with the help of Nikolai Fine Art in the winter/spring of 2002. It was a giant charm bracelet with a huge billboard, again promoting the idea of a New York arts lottery.

DDL: *There is a common thread through much of your work—good fortune, good luck, and positive energy. Then there are objects such as the giant-sized oyster and string of pearls. What can you tell me about those works?*

KG: Those were early works that functioned as roadside signs. There is a book that I love, *Learning from Las Vegas*, in which Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour talk about the Las Vegas strip as a type of civic space in which the skyline serves the purpose of cultural enhancement. It made me think of New Haven, Connecticut, where Interstate 95 passes the harbor, and there's a spectacular, panoramic view. This expanse of large scale and speed was a perfect site for *The World is Your Oyster*, in which I created and installed a 50-foot steel sign, a 100-foot string of giant pearls, and an oversized talking oyster. The oyster housed a light-up globe instead of a pearl. The soundtrack, "Oyster Facts & Fictions," explained facts about the New Haven harbor, which once had an oyster industry that fueled the regional economy, an industry that today stands devastated by oil spills and pollution.

DDL: *You've already mentioned one book. What about other influences?*

KG: In 1992, I went back to Yale University to study with Linda Nochlin. She turned me on to the German theorist Jürgen Habermas who wrote *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989). This work is about the genesis of the public sphere, which is the realm of our social structure where public opinion can be formed as long as freedom of expression, free speech, and equal access to information are guaranteed. In this light, I could see artists in the public arena as intensifiers of public discussion. It was my plan to kick off a huge *Save Our Sound* consciousness-raising event with *The World Is Your Oyster*, but instead, it started a reactionary PR campaign by local industries worried that facts about local environmental abuses, such as oil spills and industrial dumping in the Long Island Sound, were being brought to public attention.

DDL: *I see the same social consciousness and awareness in the small cluster houses that you built.*

KG: Those were constructed of polypropylene netting stretched over a frame of EMT tubing, snap-fastened



Bedrock, 1986–87. Metal EMT tubing, polypropylene netting, latex caulking, and found objects, 6 pieces, approximately 12 x 10 x 9 ft.

like a truck to the frame. Then they were troweled over with a high-tech caulking compound. There were found objects too. The houses were about the human need to have a dwelling space. They were typical Americana. Most of them looked like '60s prefab tract houses. They were symbols for how basic and intrinsic a dwelling space is to everyone.

DDL: *Crucible (1987) is very different from most of your other pieces. For one, it has a very dreamy quality.*

KG: *Crucible* is symbolic of things going to seed. It is about November, when everything dies on the vine. I was reading a lot of Symbolist plays at the time. Symbolism is in-between space, as in the work of the playwright Maurice Maeterlinck, where everything is set in a slightly skewed reality.

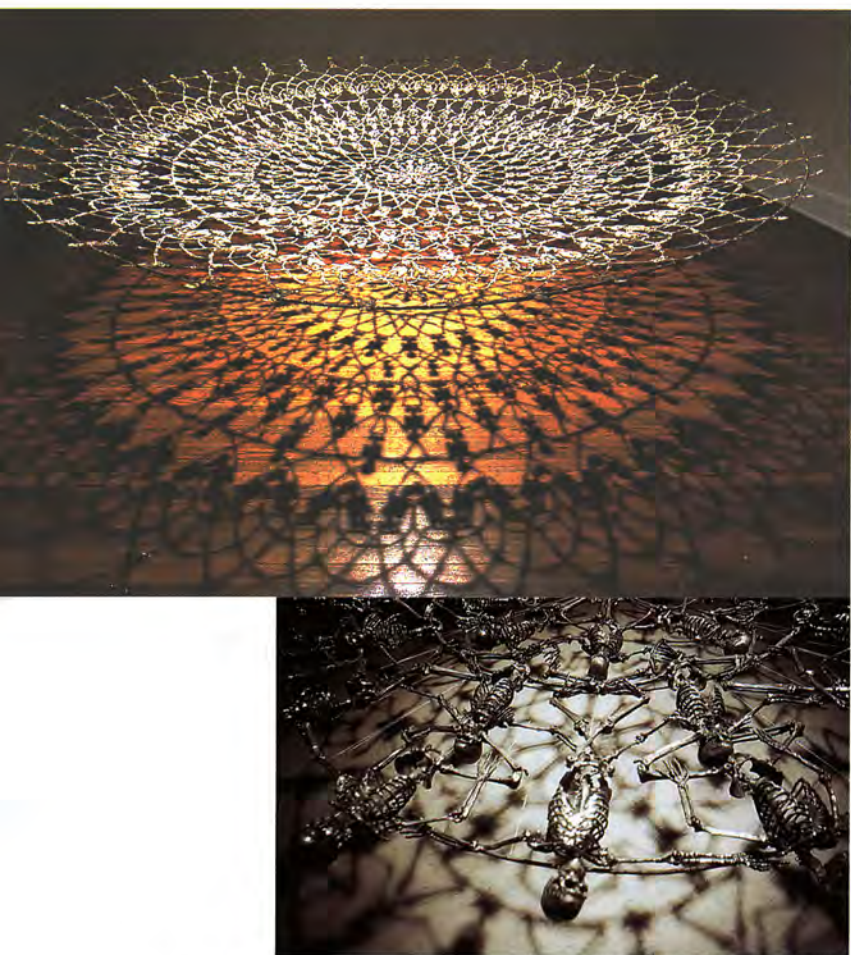
DDL: *What about the skeleton pieces?*

KG: These newer works are indoor pieces. They are more contemplative, yet they are still signage. The skeleton webs are built in layers of symbols. For me, skeletons symbolize the human architectural framework and its use as a source of inspiration for artists throughout history. The weaving together of the skeletons into a web symbolizes artistic production. Also, the symbolic gesture of the light passing through the piece transforms it into a giant lacework of light.

DDL: *I know that you are working on a vessel series now—what can you tell me about that project?*

My works are symbolic gestures.

I'm prompting the general public to participate in the formation of the sign.



This page, above and detail: *Safety Net*, 1998. Paper, wire, and light, 12 ft. diameter. Opposite, top left: *Harbinger (oil)*, 2003. Fiberglass bells, industrial pump, and crude oil, 6.5 x 2 ft. Top right: *Harbinger (milk)*, 2003. Fiberglass bells, industrial pump, and crude oil, 6.5 x 2 ft. Bottom: *#12 Year of the Fans*, 1984–85. Welded steel, PVC electrical wire, painted polypropylene netting, and stainless steel frame, 12 pieces, approximately 10 x 12 x 9 ft.

KG: That one is also an indoor piece. It's about containment. The three objects, the bell, the urn, and the flying saucer, are titled *Harbinger*, *Vessel*, and *Craft*. The vessel symbolizes the well of creative inspiration. The craft symbolizes the journey, where the work takes you. The harbinger is the messenger of the work, its text. Each of the three elements displaces the others in terms of the function. The electro-magnetically levitated flying saucer emits a ringing noise. The urns have projections on them to suggest movement. And the bells, the harbingers, are turned upside down, fountain-like, with liquid spilling out of them.

DDL: *In hearing you speak, it is quite clear that you wish to communicate with everyone, regardless of their age or experience. Whether or not everyone sees your work in the same way is not important.*

KG: I like that accessibility. Once I start working with a symbol it's a long-term commitment. Many symbols

keep popping up in different contexts and in different forms. They're slippery and can change easily. Symbols are like a pitch or a note in music: they are very relative. Another analogy is to color. You put one color next to another—it can get absorbed or it can get pushed. How a symbol morphs is relative to what surrounds it—other symbols, the political climate, or current events. Look at the way we have viewed the White House in just the last five years. How has that symbol morphed?

DDL: *Has the symbolism of White House/Green House changed since its first appearance?*

KG: The first version was a huge greenhouse in the shape of the White House, presented by Real Art Ways in Hartford, Connecticut, and installed at the Connecticut Resource Recovery recycling facility. We focused on symbols that accentuated recycling and alternative energy systems using solar power and methane recovery. The project was conceived during Desert Storm and developed at a time when alternative energy and oil shortages were fresh in everyone's minds.

In 1996, a different version of the project was hosted by the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation and the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council in Battery Park. This time, the piece celebrated George Washington and the history of Lower Manhattan as the original site of the U.S. capital. Also, the structure became the site for a voter registration drive. The rose bushes were installed especially for this project, then later donated to Battery Park. With Wall Street, the Statue of Liberty, and Fraunces Tavern as a backdrop at the site, the symbolism was overwhelmingly about democracy.

Then in the summer/fall of 2001, a modular version of *White House/Green House* was installed at Nikolai Fine Art in Chelsea, in the courtyard behind the gallery. This portable version was meant to be like a home hobby kit, so that everyone could own the White House. This was just before 9/11. Now, I'm not really sure how to read its symbolism. I took the piece down shortly after that.

DDL: *In 1989, you were in a political show, "Trouble In Paradise" curated by Dana Friis-Hansen, at the MIT List Visual Arts Center. Do you still consider yourself an artist who addresses political issues?*

KG: I was just out of graduate school then and surrounded by people involved in the culture wars. Even the original *White House/Green House* project was subject to direct scrutiny at the time when Real Art Ways proposed it for the "RAW Specifics" series. There is a history of social concerns in my work that continues in what I'm doing now, but I think all artists work through their time in history. Anyway, it may be impossible to avoid being affected by the socio-political environment we are in now. One of the new works, *Harbinger*, is a bell-like fountain that flows with crude oil. Energy resources and environmental issues are common threads that run through my work,

but I think I'd like to work on a more communitarian level, trying to create symbolic gestures or actions that are positive, like growing roses with alternative energy.

DDL: *What do you think of the use of new media technologies in contemporary art? Do any of them fit into your work?*

KG: Most of my upcoming projects include new media processes in the creation and presentation, such as the surround cinema shelter I'm working on now. Also, I just finished designing an info-station touch-screen kiosk for a companion piece to a large outdoor three-dimensional billboard. It's especially interesting to be able to combine new mediums with more traditional ones and to present them in edu-tainment formats in civic spaces. But the true impact of new media on art culture will not be determined for some time, I think.

DDL: *Is there a difference in how you approach interior and exterior spheres?*

KG: Well, early on, and for a good part of my career, I worked in a genre called "artist-initiated temporary public art," which allowed a great deal of flexibility and experimentation. I now think that was the foundation for my permanent public art commissions. In 1993, I lectured at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, where I explained this process of the artist having a vision for a piece at a particular site (usually a non-art site), then approaching the community to involve them, and developing the project with them. Often, the pieces were hosted by wonderful institutions that had categories set up to handle experimental works in non-art settings. Most recently, I did a project [*Safety Net*] this way for the Irish biannual EV+A 1998, inside St. Mary's Cathedral, Limerick, which was founded in 1168. The piece was then shown in the Cathedral of St. John The Divine in 1999, accompanied by a companion show at Nikolai Fine Art. By then, I had moved to New York City and began focusing on drawings and paintings as well.

DDL: *You seem to reinstall your works in different locations. How do these different environments change the perception of your work?*

KG: Usually, I revisit a piece because there is something I want to investigate further. If I feel I need to explore a piece further, there is a reason, and a new site presents with new possibilities. Yet most of the large-scale installations are now in private collections on estates. Also, the drawings, smaller studies, and models began to be in demand, so I began working with a gallery.

DDL: *Is there a common thread that runs through each piece?*

KG: The investigation of signs and symbolism. I also gravitate to a certain type of shape, such as a near-minimal form with an internal dynamics or something that has a metaphysical property. In *Harbinger*, the bell shape fascinates me because it's almost vessel-like.

DDL: *Your work changes a lot in material, text, and techniques.*



KG: Yes, it does change in these ways, but I think there is still that common thread. Even so, I always want to be able to experiment and develop new projects, because working is about a certain type of scholarship or research, and researching and developing new projects is what I live for. Ultimately, artists only have their time in the studio to be able to practice their craft. Maybe everything else is just icing on the cake.

D. Dominick Lombardi writes regularly for the New York Times, Westchester Section, and Sculpture.