Assignment Week 8: A Place for Art (Creative)

Deadication

They had had enough. We should have seen it coming, of course. After decades of being crapped on, slept beside, climbed on, etched into, and selfied with, you would have risen up, too. Some old-timers say the plan was hatched all the way back in 1989, when rookies from the visiting San Francisco Giants were goaded into yet again painting the genitals of General Philip Sheridan’s horse black and orange in the dead of night. Defacing this statue was an annual road-trip tradition for the players, but a humiliation the statue could endure no longer.

The statues had lain in wait ever since, the old-timers go on to say. The Sheridan statue indoctrinated fellow classic works nearby, and the word spread across the city. New public art was radicalized at the first opportunity, as soon after the unveiling as it could be managed. It didn't take much to bring them on board. The public art of Chicago had plenty of cause to be angry.

Some sculptures got too enthusiastic. With so much pent-up rage at generations of Chicagoans using its angled base like a playground slide, the untitled
Picasso in Daley Plaza eventually had to be given its own stream of disinformation, lest it slip up and somehow spoil the plans. Having no discernable mouth did nothing to keep it from being a real loudmouth.

Before being seen as the opening shots of an uprising, the early incidents were written off as mere freak accidents. What else to call the collapse of the Bean’s curved underside, entombing a platoon of Segway tourists beneath chrome? When the hundred-foot steel lattice baseball bat outside the Social Security building tipped over one night and flattened a car, it seemed like mere misfortune—when one overlooked the three other crushed cars within a hundred-foot radius.

Soon, the signs of revolt were impossible to ignore. The bronze bull outside the Chicago Cultural Center uprooted and took off down Washington on a goring spree. Nobody could reach the Federal Building, what with Calder’s Flamingo backflipping and pinwheeling all over the plaza, lashing a giant red tentacle at anyone who approached. There were multiple reports that the cloaked figure of Death from Graceland Cemetery was going about tapping shoulders and claiming commuters waiting for the 22 Clark bus.

Unaware what was afoot elsewhere, I was aboard a Divvy rental bike, riding into Jackson Park over the lunch hour. A warm November day had lured me outside, and a recollection that the park had some new art had given me the direction. The sculpture was not far away, just across the lagoon on the Wooded Island, but reaching it actually took about two or three tries. The exterior of the park was fenced off during a restoration of its lagoon. Finding the path onto the island meant navigating a labyrinth of chain-link and green cloth until I found the right inlet.
Crossing up and over a bridge, I was finally on the trail and could see the sculpture up ahead. It protruded from the grass just beyond the entrance to the Garden of the Phoenix, an original garden from the 1893 World’s Fair with Japanese landscaping and structures.

Dedicated only the week before, Skylanding resembled twelve lotus leaves emerging from the ground in a narrow strip of fresh grass. Each leaf was a curving piece of stainless steel, about an inch thick, rising to a point perhaps a dozen feet in the air. The petals were set in three concentric circles of four each, each becoming more angled to lean backward toward the outer edge. After studying them from my bike, I walk over and rap my knuckle on one of the petals. A slight bell-like toll.

To either side of the sculpture, raised curving berms formed halves of an S that centered on the lotus. Berms so new that the planed edges still had sharp manufactured creases. Atop one berm sat three kids—probably University of Chicago students—who had been laughing before their chatter came to a quick stop. One girl lifted her arm to point in the air, toward something further south in the park. A glint of gilded laurel moved between the treetops.

The Statue of the Republic was a bit further north of Hayes Drive than usual. And the Golden Lady was swinging her staff to clear the way as she went. Century-old trees splintered as she cleared her path to rumble up the Wooded Island.

The U of C undergrads screamed and bolted. Not having nearly as expensive of an education, I had no better plan than to stay frozen where I was. It would only take a few more broken trees to begin my standoff with 24 feet of robed rage.
To my left, a glint of reflected light. The *Skylanding* lotus was curling one leaf in a "come over here" motion. Beckoning this way, it looked a lot more like a Venus flytrap, or the Act One break in "Little Shop of Horrors." On the other hand, the looks of what was coming my way weren't much better.

Without taking my eyes off of the wavering trees ahead, I sidestepped over to the outer lotus petal curling at me. It stopped. A petal in the next circle within the lotus waved to me. I moved further inside. The entire inner circle began to wave at me. Up ahead, the bronze staff and a massive sandaled foot burst through the last row of trees.

The inner circle of steel petals flung outward and dragged me into the dead center of the lotus. From this vantage, the offset of the circles block off any view of the outside—nothing but steel ahead and sky above. Then the petals begin to close over me. One by one, the lotus closed over me.

And we wait. The Golden Lady approaches, stands over us for a long moment. She stabs lazily at the lotus with her staff, making a *clang* that makes the air around me shimmer. Whether bored or just willing to let this human skate, the Statue of the Republic moves on, trampling a Port-a-Potty situated peculiarly close to the sculpture, and by the sounds of it, the U of C students inside it.

When it sounded clear that she had left the island, moving through the lagoon’s waters toward the Museum of Science and Industry, the lotus petals open up. I step out.

"Thanks."
One lotus petal reaches out. I step a little closer. The petal's end point curls up, and raps my head. "Ow," I say. There is no bell-like toll.

The city's struggle with public art revolution has lasted until now, into the spring. As long as you watch where you're going, and know what art is there, and what its beefs are, you are generally okay.

Besides, there is art that has saved my life.