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Vita Brevis:
A Public Art Initiative at Boston’s Institute of Contemporary Art

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Introduction

The Latin adage, “ars longa, vita brevis,” which roughly translates to “art is long, life is brief,” evokes the power of art to transcend time. In other words, life may be fleeting, but art lasts forever. “Vita Brevis,” then, is a somewhat playful, though fitting, name for the Boston Institute of Contemporary Art’s temporary public art program. The partnership between the ICA, a permanent institution, and Vita Brevis, a program of temporary public art, addressed the subject of site more meaningfully than either could have done independently. To the ICA, the principal asset of Vita Brevis—and that of all temporary public art programs—was its motility. With its founding in 1997 by Jill Medvedow, the program dislocated the museum, dislodging it from its own physical space and its place in the cultural fabric of the city, and allowed it a set of branches, bearing new relevance to sites that the museum previously had no means of engaging. Likewise, the imprimatur of the ICA allowed Vita Brevis and its art an established visitor base and cultural cachet not normally accorded to public or temporary works in Boston. Though short-lived (the program was discontinued in 2007), this partnership effectively used varied sites to embed its artwork in the cultural and historical context of Boston in a way that could not have been accomplished otherwise.

The air of “newness” hovering about contemporary art—so often disconcerting to casual viewers—was not an issue with Vita Brevis, as the program frequently addressed sites that were the antithesis of “new.” Site was the most crucial dimension of the program; its easily accessible (often outdoor) pieces allowed its parent institution access to the broader location of Boston itself—a city whose own history, in an even broader sense, teems with national significance. For tourists and lifelong Bostonians alike, popular historical sites often tend to overshadow contemporary art in the city. Vita Brevis took that situation as its starting point; it sought to
correct the imbalance by presenting contemporary art that directly responded to overwhelmingly popular sites and the implicit historical narratives. The curators of Vita Brevis used site to bridge the gap between artists and audiences, replacing the unfamiliar “newness” of a contemporary art museum with the familiarity of tourist destinations.

Vita Brevis was originally founded by Medvedow as an independent organization. As Medvedow states in her article, “Contour and Context: Five Years of Vita Brevis,” “Vita Brevis began, in part, as an effort to identify broad ideas that already mattered to the local citizenry and use them as a bridge between audiences and art and artists.”1 Though novel for the city of Boston, the premise of a more engaged public art is nothing new. Other organizations, like Art Angel in London or Creative Time and Public Art Fund in New York, undertake a similar task. Lucy Lippard, in her article, “Pilot Lights,” describes Creative Times’ founding as “art’s integration into daily life … it could blur the distinction between art and life.”2 The ambitious spirit of these endeavors formed a guiding model for Vita Brevis in Boston. When Medvedow became the director of the ICA in 1998, the program was folded into the museum. While Vita Brevis functioned inside the conventional museum world, it maintained a flexible organization structure for commissioning new works.

The context of Vita Brevis was particularly relevant to its formation. Boston is a city invested in traditionalism; its citizenry identifies strongly with its rich history. It is a source of pride as well as income. Consequently, popular historical sites often tend to overshadow contemporary art in Boston, particularly in terms of the sheer size of the public it reaches. Vita Brevis sought to correct this imbalance by presenting contemporary art that directly responds to

and engages in the cultural and historic wealth of the city. Cher Krause Knight, in her book *Public Art: Theory, Practices, and Populism*, writes that Vita Brevis “intends to build art audiences ‘outside mainstream museum’...Vita Brevis aims to make contemporary art more vital in Boston, a city mired in its traditionalism.”

There has been little scholarly research done on the subject of Vita Brevis. In 2004, the ICA published the book *Vita Brevis: History, Landscape, and Art 1998-2003*, which remains the most comprehensive look at the program to date. However, it does not include those projects done after 2003. Krzysztof Wodiczko’s contribution, *The Bunker Hill Monument*, is perhaps the best known Vita Brevis project, and there have been significant art historical research written on the work itself, such as Sarah Purcell’s excellent article, “Commemoration, Public Art, and the Changing Meaning of Bunker Hill,” originally published in *Public Historian* in 2003. Yet, Vita Brevis as a museum program has been given little attention. Since 2004 there has been almost no documentation of Vita Brevis other than local newspaper articles. These, along with museum archives at the ICA, are one of the only extant record of the projects done from 2004-2007. Cher Krause Knight’s book, *Public Art: Theory Practices, and Populism* (2008) is the only instance where Vita Brevis is included in a larger dialogue about public art’s function in a museum. Of course many texts have been invaluable to the development of a program like Vita Brevis, including Miwon Kwan’s *One Place After Another: Site Specific Art and Locational Identity* (2004), Hilde Hein’s *Public Art: Thinking Museums Differently* (2006), Patricia Phillips’ “Temporality and Public Art,” published in *Critical Issues in Public Art: Content, Context, and Controversy* (1992) and the work of Mary Jane Jacobs, such as the 1991 exhibition “Places with

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With this thesis, I would like to situate Vita Brevis in a larger discourse of public art and museum studies. By taking an art historical approach, I hope to contribute original research, which will fill a gap in the field—examining the role a public art initiative can play in a museum. Vita Brevis, because of its unique position as a program in a museum, exists as a successful example of how public art and a museum can collaborate, strengthening both institutions. Vita Brevis spanned 10 years and developed more than 25 art installations, and while Medvedow, in the publication *Vita Brevis: History, Landscape, and Art 1998-2003*, addresses the projects chronologically, the development of Vita Brevis was not as neatly linear as it has been presented. Rather than follow Medvedow’s method, this paper will first discuss Vita Brevis’ unique position as a public art program in a museum, and Chapter 1 will present Vita Brevis as a uniquely parallel and complementary venture to the mission of its host in the ICA. Chapter 2 will analyze the city of Boston itself as a site, and highlight the many ways in which this site affected the development of Vita Brevis. Boston is a city invested in its history; consequently, contemporary arts—and, by extension, the ICA—have never played a vital role in the formulation of the city’s identity, Vita Brevis sought to change this. Chapter 3 will highlight temporality as a key component to the overarching goal of Vita Brevis. The remaining chapters will focus on those projects that were exemplary of the program as a whole, those that garnered the most press attention, and those most intimately concerned with history and site. These case studies will be organized into three main areas of interest: public monuments and memorials, public parks and social histories. This will enable the grouping of projects that have similar thematic concerns. While the artists working with monuments, memorials and public parks
address literal sites, the artists in the social histories category are concerned with philosophical sites. The work in this group is less about addressing the physicality of a location than recasting or re-imagining the history of Boston society through its cultural artifacts, held up as manifestations of its cultural identity. Finally, the paper will suggest that the program provides a model of institutional practice that would allow countless other museums to engage more meaningfully with the historical and contemporary cultures of their own cities. The projects of Vita Brevis collectively reflect how the ICA utilized public art to strengthen its relationship to the city of Boston by taking art beyond the sanctity of the space within museum walls and inviting the community to become involved in an art experience.
Chapter 1 – The ICA and Public Art

When Jill Medvedow became director of the Boston’s Institute of Contemporary Art in 1998, Vita Brevis became a permanent program at the ICA under the curatorial direction of Carol Anne Meehan, forming a unique relationship between the museum and public art. Public art does not typically play a part in museum operations and research shows that no other museum in a major metropolitan area has a public art program. Hilde Hein, in her book Public Art: Thinking Museums Differently, writes, “The museum is represented as an institution, magisterial and materially hard,” while public art is “an engagement in strategic challenges to the city structure and mediums that mediate our everyday perceptions of the world.” In Hein’s view, the museum is essentially a fixed institution, preserving and exhibiting the past, whereas public art – particularly temporary public art – like that which Vita Brevis promotes has the potential to be fluid by changing and responding to everyday life. Hein certainly oversimplifies both institutions—in the recent past museums have become more welcoming to a broader visitor base, and certainly not all public art is altruistically conscious of its public—however, such characterizations are generally supportable. The institutions may share basic motives (garnering meaningful and lasting public interest in the artworks they exhibit), but they have vastly different tools at their disposal. In unifying them, the ICA chose to highlight an attribute of Vita Brevis that the museum could not claim: its ability to insert itself into public space (a characteristic shared, not coincidentally, with many of the city’s popular memorials and tourist destinations.

The ICA has often worked against the establishment of a meaningful and lasting public interest in art. Sustained engagement with the public is based on a strong personal reaction to a specific artwork or more general art experience, through either individual experience or fostered

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4 Hilde Hein, Public Art: Thinking Museums Differently (Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2006), xix.
5 Ibid, 83.
by the museum’s educational programs. The highly personalized reaction of an individual to a piece of art remains the fundamental building block of an institution’s success. Many institutional practices of the ICA, and museums in general, have a deleterious effect on personal interpretations of the works they display, such as the placement of an artwork in the framework of the gallery. The contextualization of an artwork within an exhibition, an artist’s oeuvre, or even the arc of art history, suggests that the substance of the piece is contextual. The context of the museum itself implies this; that the institution has chosen to display one particular work and not another confirms its greater value. A visit to the ICA is not simply a series of art experiences; it is also the experience of the museum context itself. Those who understand the particular demands and rewards of the museum are more likely to enjoy themselves there, and more likely to return.

Carol Duncan, in her book *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, describes this as the museum ritual. “Like most ritual space, museum space is carefully marked off and culturally designated as reserved for a special quality of attention—in this case, for contemplation and learning. One is also expected to behave with a certain decorum.”  

She argues that the ritual one is expected to enact when in an art museum can give some a feeling of cultural ownership and belonging while they make others feel inferior and excluded. The ICA and its staff, though sincere in their mission of public goodwill, ultimately court a narrow demographic; that is, those who privilege the museum experience and are able to enact the ritual it demands. In the past few decades, the ICA has made a concerted attempt to broaden their visitor base through increased educational programs and outreach efforts. But, as Mary Jane Jacob remarks, the aim

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7 Duncan, 4.
of such an agenda is still “more to colonize persons and communities and turn them into museum-goers than to establish new relationships and continuing, permanent vehicles of exchange and mutual respect.”

Alternatively, as Jacob observes, “when there are no real doors and admissions are taken away, the audience changes.” Public art, because it is so often on the street, cannot choose its audience. It meets the art-loving pilgrim, the casual passerby, or the unwilling viewer, and must weather the storms of controversy, neglect, and apathy. It is, essentially, only what the public makes of it. Of course, not all public art places its emphasis on the public; the abundant examples of nineteenth-century civic monument or the derogatorily termed “plop” sculptures of the twentieth century prove that not all public art is identical in purpose. Public art for the purpose of beautification or commemoration indeed has its place in the public sphere, and it is not the intent of this paper to place value judgments of what constitutes “good” or “bad” public art. However, in the last few decades, there has been a definitive shift in focus from art object to audience, assigning importance not only to “artistic expression” but also to a direct engagement with particular audience groups. Suzanne Lacy, in her book *Mapping the Terrain* written two years before the creation of Vita Brevis, terms this approach “new genre public art:”

We might describe ‘new genre public art’ to distinguish it in both form and intention from what has been called ‘public art’ — a term used for the past twenty-five years to describe sculpture and installations sites in public spaces. Unlike much of what has heretofore been called public art, new genre public art — visual art that uses both traditional and non-traditional media to communicate and interact with a broad and diversified audience about issues directly relevant to their lives — is based on engagement.

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Though the term “new genre public art” has not been widely adopted—“relational aesthetics”\(^1\) is used to distinguish public art that is engaged in its site—its conceptual underpinnings had pervasive influence on expectations of public art, and consequently the creation of Vita Brevis in 1997.

A year later in 1998, the erection of the *Irish Famine Memorial* by Robert Shure (b.1948) on Washington Street in downtown Boston, revealed a growing dissatisfaction with the existing model of public art in Boston. The memorial, commissioned by local real estate developer, Thomas J. Flatley, consists of a series of bronze figurative sculptures that depicts its subjects reaching out in hunger, bones visible under the skin of their feeble bodies. The overly literal melodrama of the scene caused many to criticize its lack of subtlety; Christine Temin of the *Boston Globe* reviled “its thudding literalness”\(^2\) and Pallas Lombardi, then director of the Cambridge Arts Council, called it “an embarrassment.”\(^3\) Though the memorial on the surface fits snugly into the cannon of Boston public art of bronze memorials, the harshly critical public reaction to the piece indicated the tides were turning toward a more adventurous era of public art in Boston.

The adoption of Vita Brevis by the ICA that very same year and the program’s first large scale exhibition on the Freedom Trail, was not in direct response to the Irish Hunger Memorial, but rather to the overwhelming preponderance of bronzes in Boston which erection the Irish Hunger Memorial made increasingly apparent. The program placed the viewer at the forefront of its mission in order to connect Boston audiences to contemporary public art. While the program

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\(^3\) Ibid.
was dedicated to the advancement of contemporary art, it also responded to building a broad base of viewers for such art; artistic integrity coupled with audience engagement. Vita Brevis pointed to the unsuitability of the ICA for such emerging forms. Therefore, the program cultivated exhibition spaces not in galleries but on the public streets. The city became the primary exhibition site (like in Munster’s “Skulptur Projekte” and Jacob’s “Culture in Action” in Chicago or “Making History” in Charleston, which will be discussed in Chapter 2) and its citizens were considered more than passive audience members; they became co-creators of the art works.

While the art context of the museum can hinder unmitigated experience of work, public art also has its drawbacks on the opposite end of the spectrum. By virtue of the fact that it is free of an art context, it is perhaps too easy for patrons to ignore it or pass it by. Regardless of how aggressively it may insert itself in public space it is still competing for the attention of people who often are not prepared for an art experience. As Harriet Senie writes in her essay, “Baboons, Pet Rocks, and Bomb Threats: Public Art and Public Perception,” without an art context usually provided by the museum, “the public audience is excluded from the art experience ostensibly intended for them and the art remains a foreign object on familiar turf.”

Museums provide the literal and figurative framework for which to view art, and without such an educational component, viewers are tasked with finding or assigning meanings in a subjective experience; it is a more demanding experience and experience to which some can connect very deeply but others may be left without a guiding compass. While it may not provide an art context, the approach of public art remains a fitting rejoinder to the highly contextualized environment of a museum.

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Art historical discourse is a dialectic founded on museum art, and public art exists at least one degree of remove from the traditional institution for art exhibition. Patricia C. Phillips argues that public art exists on the border of discourse. “Public art remains theoretically and practically marginalized.”\textsuperscript{15} It is very often isolated from art theory. So rarely do art history texts integrate public art—other than occasional example of early memorials—into their timelines, simply because art history is an academic practice and is thus inextricably linked with institutions. Museums memorialize and valorize certain artists and works over others, and it is their values that are reflected in the bulk of art historical studies. A category of art that necessarily rejects the approval of an institution will almost inevitably receive less than its due in the study of art history. The art in a museum derives its legitimacy, for the most part, from the reputation of institution that presents it. There are also different economic systems at work. Museums generally rely on collectors, patrons, trustees, and memberships for provisions, while public art has a distinctly different apparatus for the production and distribution of artwork. Yet, critics and artists fail to see that public art and museum art are not two diametrically opposed practices. Public art and museums may have different support structures that keep them in place but they are motivated by the same things: providing a meaningful art experience.

Collaboration between museums and public art is not a wholly unique concept. Hein in her book \textit{Public Art: Thinking Museums Differently} believes museums could benefit by adopting a public art paradigm, that is, one of institutional fluidity, experimentation, and social activism. But while Hein argues for public agency in museum, she does not suggest exactly how this might be accomplished. She only suggests the \textit{qualities} museums should borrow from public art, without utilizing public art in any concrete manner. Implementing a public art program at a

museum is a much more effective way in which the two can collaborate, mutually benefiting both practices. From the ICA, Vita Brevis gained a cultural legitimacy embodied in the museum. Knight believes, “With the prestige, protection, and context of a museum comes the assertion that while one may not like its works, one cannot question that they are, indeed, art.”¹⁶ As a blue chip-stamped public art program, Vita Brevis had a cultural cachet not normally accorded to public or temporary works in Boston. The ICA also provided an established visitor base for the projects of Vita Brevis. The two were ideal candidates for the first major partnership between a public art program and a museum in the United States.

Vita Brevis gave the ICA what museums are arguably lacking: mobility. It dislodged the museum from its own physical space and allowed it access to sites that the museum previously had no means of engaging. The program constructed multiple environments and audiences of limited duration, giving the museum access to a breadth of viewers they could not normally reach. Vita Brevis not only gave the museum access to a larger audience but also widened its presence in the community. Though not always intentional, the ICA can be hermitically removed from daily life in Boston. It is important that museum staff and artists interact more consistently with non-art members of the community. The curators and artists of Vita Brevis drew strength from neighborhood groups and churches and non-arts organizations like the National Park Service and Boston’s Parks and Recreation Department. By collaborating with institutions different in nature, the ICA was able to build relationships with groups outside itself. Working actively with the community was necessary to bring the works of Vita Brevis to fruition. Of course, this requires an engaged citizenry, one that is willing to donate its time, space, and resources. Yet, by engaging community members and officials, Vita Brevis ceded a certain

¹⁶ Knight, 54.
amount of autonomy. The community became a co-creator in the art making process and retained a sense of mutual responsibility for the work. In doing so, the community also gained shared ownership of the artwork that they helped produce. This required the ICA to relinquish the bonds of creative ownership and authority. Doug Ashford in “A Conversation on Social Collaboration” explains, “The idea of collaborative practice meant investing in the deprofessionalization of the context and each other—people doing things they hadn’t done and rejecting those hierarchies.” Cultural involvement is a necessary component of public engagement.

The ICA did not use Vita Brevis as merely a signpost for the museum, hoping to prompt more visitors to its physical building. It presented the program as a parallel and complementary venture; much of the signage for the projects had limited reference to the museum itself, other than its name. Vita Brevis was accorded a level of autonomy that is striking, one that no other program in the museum can claim. The public projects rarely corresponded to exhibitions inside the galleries, but were separate exhibitions in themselves. A notable exception is Shimon Attie’s *An Unusually Bad Lot* (1999), which not only complemented his exhibition at the ICA but also utilized the museum facade as a public site. Most Vita Brevis projects, however, were independent of the museum. Artist Terri Rueb, who worked with Vita Brevis in 2007 for “Art on the Harbor Islands,” says, “It is a rare thing for institutions to fund and present parallel priorities from their galleries. The ICA supported a much broader agenda than gallery based art, and the ways in which ICA was exceptional is tied to Vita Brevis itself.”

Because the projects of Vita Brevis existed outside the museum’s walls, there have been no

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18 Teri Rueb, phone interview with the author, February 2, 2010.
significant attempts to determine its precise impact on the Boston community. It would be interesting to know how many people interacted with the works of Vita Brevis, but without any controlled way to accurately record attendance, like tickets sold in museum, actual numbers are difficult to gauge. Curator Meehan, in a conference titled “Contemporary Art and History Museums?” admitted, “Tracking audience, both in terms of numbers and in quality of their experience, can be very challenging and sometimes involves guesswork. Many of our projects end up in very public areas without any dedicated staff, but we have used interns and volunteers to conduct informal surveys and just to observe the public’s interactions with a given project.”

Niho Kozuru’s project at the Paul Revere House in 2004 provided a rare opportunity to have a guest book on site, and is subsequently one of the only projects with documented audience response (See Chapter 5). After her piece, Portal of Prayer, was installed at Boston’s Logan Airport, Ellen Band made numerous visits to observe the reactions of viewers. Though they were informal observations, Band admits she wished the museum had done more in documenting how the piece was received.

Unfortunately, measurements of the success of Vita Brevis are only anecdotal. Yet, learning to forgo attendance records as evidence of success allows the museum to focus on the quality of viewer experience rather than mere quantity of visitors. As Olafur Eliasson said, “Letting go of these concerns is not a part of the accepted museum protocol…but there is a value in letting go that we might not see. There is a certain value in actually saying that we have a society where there is space for letting go.”

There is no such thing as a perfect environment either in physical, architectural, or curatorial context for an art experience. The only thing that one can do is provide an environment

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where there is the greatest possibility for an ideal art experience. Public art and museums independently have evolved innumerable variations on that elusive ideal, but there is greater opportunity for such when they cooperate. In the unique collaboration between public art and a museum, Vita Brevis provided a model of institutional practice that would allow countless other museums to engage more meaningfully with the contemporary cultures of their own cities. Traditionally, museums and public art operate in distinct spheres, rarely intersecting, but in partnering the two, both practices are duly strengthened.
Chapter 2 – Site

Artworks historically described as site-specific have tended to respond to their immediate surroundings, both physical and social. When a “site” is as heterogeneous and sprawling as the city of Boston, the contextual ground for a work specific to that site is exponentially more complex. An artist’s response to a particular patch of public park or street may encompass an enormous amount of information about that site, but it becomes increasingly difficult to conceive of a piece that responds to all of the innumerable aspects of a site as conceptually and physically immense. The city of Boston itself as a site, greatly affected the development of Vita Brevis.

Boston is a city invested in its history; consequently, contemporary arts—and, by extension, the ICA—have never played a vital role in the formulation of the city’s identity. This is evident in the visitor attendance statistics of Boston historic sites compared to the ICA; in 2008, Boston’s historic Freedom Trail drew over three million tourists. The ICA, even after moving to its current, more high profile location on the waterfront, received only a fraction of that number at 280,000 visitors in the same year.

The unending cache of cultural material of the city, cultivated over more than three centuries, remained largely untapped by the ICA until it inaugurated Vita Brevis. The program was founded as a contemporary art museum’s response to the cultural and historical wealth of Boston. The implementation of the Vita Brevis program and the role that the Boston cityscape played as the physical location and conceptual inspiration for new works of art, connected Boston audiences to contemporary art. Vita Brevis covered an ambitious range of sites in Boston.

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23 Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, “The Institute of Contemporary Art’s First Year in Waterfront building brings Record Attendance,” http://www.icaboston.org/about/pressreleases/1st-Anniv/.
venturing as far a field as the Harbor Islands to the heart of downtown, the Common (See Appendix A for complete site map). The importance of site and the rise of site-specific works in the later half of the twentieth century are thoroughly historicized in the cannon of art. This is a vastly important dimension of contemporary art as a whole, and one that ICA, Boston’s premier venue for contemporary work, was unable to tap before the establishment of Vita Brevis. The sites the artists chose were highly visible and have been thoroughly historicized by academic texts, guidebooks and visitor pamphlets. The artists used the historic sites as a platform to interject collective and personal memories of the contemporary Boston community, while also making visitors aware of history’s lessons and meanings. These works highlighted a category of memory—personal and recent—that is traditionally excluded from historic locations. By engaging directly with the sites at the heart of Boston’s tourism industry, Vita Brevis staked its claim in the territory between the public perception of “museum art” and the standing examples of the city’s public art. The theme of the Vita Brevis program as a whole also seems to be the fraught history of the city’s socially disengaged public art; this is the context in which Vita Brevis was created.

Unlike other metropolitan areas like New York or London, Boston does not have a foothold in contemporary public art. There is certainly no shortage of nineteenth century monuments, yet there is no clearly established policy for public art in the twenty-first century. Boston does not have its own percent-for-art program, a mandate to allocate a percentage of the money spent on publicly funded buildings for a public work of art. The Boston Arts Commission, which holds the power over publicly funded arts, allocates a mere quarter of a

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million dollars a year to artists who annually requests millions. Ricardo Barreto, director of the Urban Arts Institute at the Massachusetts Institute College of Art and Design calls the Commission, “dysfunctional” and even “un-functional.” Evidence of this exists on the Commission’s website which does not even list the projects it funds. In contrast, Cambridge, just across the river from Boston, is the only city in Massachusetts to have a percent-for-art program, which is run by the Cambridge Art Council. The Council’s website provides interactive neighborhood public art tours, information on the art and artists shown, and provided an introductory guide to interacting with public art.

Boston’s almost lackluster public funding for art is coupled with its lack of independent organizations for public art. There are no programs like Public Art Fund, Creative Time, or Art Angel to fill the void of a city-sponsored program. Without dedicated organizations to create opportunities for contemporary public art, Boston does not have the governmental or institutional infrastructure of keep pace with cities like New York or London. Site-specific public art practice in the twentieth and twenty-first century has expanded its field of activity beyond situating heroic statues in parks. Boston, sadly, has not moved on with it.

The complexities of the art-site relationship in urban locations has been well explored in the field of public art. Contemporary discourse considers site-specificity as part of a larger discourse integrating both architectural or geographical setting and cultural notions. Here, site-specificity, is employed to signal what Rosalyn Deutsche has termed an “urban aesthetic” or “spatial-cultural” discourse, which combines “ideas about art, architecture, and urban design, on

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27 City of Boston, Public Art, Boston Arts Commission.
the one hand, with theories of the city, social space, and public space on the other.²⁹ Because the programs examined in this paper are based in urban centers, the discussion of site specificity also will be limited to its implementation in cities.

Merely putting an artwork outside a museum does not constitute site-specific public art. Miwon Kwon, in her book One Place After Another: Site Specific Art and Locational Identity, explains, “Site is not simply a geographical location or architectural setting but a network of social relations, a community, and the artist and his sponsors envision the art work as an integral extension of the community rather than an intrusive contribution from elsewhere.”³⁰ The city of Boston is overrun with statues of important figures and monuments of this nation’s history. Standing high on pedestals, the subjects of these statues and other forms of “traditional” public art are posited to be both revered and remembered for their contributions to the city. In fact, this proliferation of subject matter can be traced back to the very origins of public art in America. In the late 18th and nineteenth century, public sculpture emerged as a means of honoring distinguished citizens, like Thomas Ball’s (1819-1911) sculpture of George Washington on horseback built in 1869 in the Boston Public Garden. Statues like George Washington, which literally and figuratively stands for something, are abundant in Boston. Yet, today they have very little relevance to their contemporary community. It would be inaccurate to call a statue of George Washington on a horse context-specific work of art because it is merely a representation of a public figure exhibited in the public domain. Public art only accomplishes site-specificity when it bares social relevancy to its contemporary community, a feat impossible to accomplish with long-term public art works. As early as 1903, Charles Mulford Robinson in his book

*Modern Civic Art* believed art should be socially relevant to its audiences, and should address the conditions before their very eyes.\(^{31}\) Therefore, George Washington cannot be deemed a form of site-specific work because, while perhaps a popular tourist destination or city emblem, it has no connection to the current social or political climate of Boston. For public art to be truly socially engaged it must take up as its subject contemporary civic interests.

The complexities of context/community-specific artwork was not generally an artist’s foremost concern when most public sculpture in Boston was executed; it became a central concern to public artists working in the latter half of the twentieth century. Three exhibitions validate the ideological foundation for *Vita Brevis*’ engagement with Boston as a site. One of the first examples of developing location as the central concept of an exhibition is the ongoing, “Skulptur Projekte” in Münster, Germany, first organized by Kapser König and Klaus Bussman in 1977. The show, held every ten years, includes sculpture, installations, and artist interventions from a worldwide selection of artists, all whom exploited with the politically charged history and culture of the German town. The 2007 press release of “Skulptur Projekte” states, “Munster: a town not only as an ‘open air museum for modern art’ but also as a place for natural confrontation between history and contemporary art…the aim of the exhibition ‘Sculpture Projects in Münster’ is to make the town of Münster comprehensible as a complex historically formed structure.”\(^{32}\) This mission is among others reflected in Jeff Koon’s (b. 1955) contribution to the 1987 exhibition. Koons created a stainless steel replica of a much-loved public sculpture of a modest country farmer, whose original bronze version was destroyed in the war. Koons deconstructs the exclusivity of the venerated bronze statue subject matter in the city of Münster, both critiquing and celebrating its socially fraught history.

\(^{31}\) Knight, *Public Art*, viii.

The 1991 exhibition “Places with a Past” in Charleston, North Carolina and 1993’s “Culture in Action,” in Chicago, Illinois, both organized by Mary Jane Jacobs, were some of the first exhibitions in the United States to utilize the entire city as a location for a site-specific exhibition. “Places with a Past,” which was arguably the conceptual progenitor for Vita Brevis, addressed the history of Charleston, reclaiming, retelling, and refining the cultural storybook of the city. For the show, the artist Liz Magor (b. 1948) hung photographs of re-enactments of Civil War events along the hallway of a Confederate widow’s home. The re-enactments’ accuracy were largely determined from Civil War photographs. Mangor conflates past with present, representation with reality, and questions the conception of a “true” history.

For “Culture in Action,” artists engaged in the contemporary life of the city, approaching the entire city as a site for artistic invention. The exhibition, a series of public projects, began by immersing each of its artists in a particular urban community. The resulting works merged art with community service. The artist collective Haha organized *Flood: A Volunteer Network for Active Participation in Healthcare* (1992-95), a group of twenty to thirty people built and maintained a hydroponic garden in a storefront in. The group grew vegetables and therapeutic herbs for people with HIV, and provided HIV/AIDS services to residents of Chicago. The garden intended to act as nurturing therapy, providing both a place for beauty and social activism. For Dan Cameron, “Culture in Action” exemplifies the transformation of public art away from the site-specificity toward the conception of art not as a removed cultural activity but as a direct reflection of community:

> “Culture in Action” falls into the category of those sculpture exhibitions which have followed the logical progression from the model of site specificity toward the apparent next stage the dissolution of the language of art altogether in favor of activities and

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interventions which take place directly in the community, away from the museum watchful eye...The work in “Culture in Action” set out to navigate that murky zone where social activism and post-site sculpture have begin to intersect.  

For Eleanor Hartley, however, the project was not without flaws, and “ultimately seemed to do little more than confirm the powerlessness of the [non-artist] participants.” Interestingly, critical response to the works were not so much based of standard art criticism or aesthetics but were measured on the social scale of how well or poorly they engaged the community they addressed. Though many criticisms were levied against “Culture in Action,” the exhibition demonstrates that art made for a specific site and shaped by a social or political orientation can address a greater awareness of community and place.

While the works of Vita Brevis were vastly different in their treatment of public space, they shared a common goal of creating a public work of art that is both relevant and involved with its public, filling the void of engaged public art in the city of Boston. Vita Brevis sought to address to the socio-historical dimensions of space, similar to past exhibitions like “Places with a Past” and the ongoing “Skulptur Projekte,” while also fill a gap in the field—examining the role a museum can play in siting public artworks. By commissioning socially conscious and community minded projects, it directly responded to the history of Boston’s socially disengaged public art.

As in many site-specific works of art, the location of Vita Brevis became the impetus for the physicality of the art and also its concept. The artists, engaged in the specificities of location, assigned the sites as the locus of the art experience, rather than the works themselves. The art was not saddled with the burden of being the primary conveyer of meaning; instead, the site

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provided the viewer with a familiar contextual framework in which to interact with the piece. The sense of mutual location—where artwork and the viewer share a geographical kinship—allowed a non-museumgoer to engage in the piece without art historical knowledge, using only the knowledge of site. The location or site became the bearer of the art experience, rather than the piece itself. Thus, the authenticity or uniqueness of the art was displaced to its location. This could have helped to garner interest in art, where interest would not normally lie. Of course, the fact that an audience shares a physical space with a Vita Brevis project did not necessarily mean the audience engaged with the piece. But, the works of Vita Brevis moved beyond the narrow definition of its geographical location and engaged the multivalent implications of its site—that is, both its physical location and network of social relations, its community.

Examining the success or failure of a site-specific work requires a solution to the problematic definition of “community.” While this paper addresses Vita Brevis’ involvement with the “Boston community,” employment of such a broad term is, by necessity, imprecise. There are no findings to report what an “average” or representative sample of Boston citizenry might be. The community referenced in this paper is a hypothetical entity, a general social category of residents living in Boston, or what Kwon calls a “Mythic Unity.” While Kwon is does not favor employing broad definitions, arguing that one should resist “common notions of community as a coherent and unified social formation,” it is impossible to identify and categorize each individual who interacts with a public artwork. For the sake of pragmatism, “community” will be used in this paper to signify a theoretical group of individuals whose

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36 Kwon, 118.
37 Kwon, 7.
reactions to and engagement with the pieces discussed hew closely to the best hopes of the artists.

That being said, it would be remiss to gloss over the complexities of the community-specific artworks of Vita Brevis. A site, whether it is a public park or a corporate office, plays home to a multitude of different groups of people. Lucy Lippard writes, “Most neighborhoods and all cities are collages of different times and cultures and circumstances.” In order to be truly site-specific, an artist must target communities within the pastiche of interacting people. How the artist identifies community may determine the work’s success of failure. The artists of “Culture in Action,” for example, referred not primarily to actual sites in Chicago but to social issues that were of interest to the artists and to the specific communities in which they had chosen to work. Artists Simon Grennan (b. 1965) and Christopher Sperandio (b. 1964), chose not to work in one particular location, but rather collaborated with members of the Baker, Confectionary and Tobacco Workers’ Union to produce a chocolate bar designed by the workers, as opposed to their managers. The project, titled We Got It!, stressed what Cameron deemed as post-site specificity, that is the community displacing the site altogether. The community of the Baker, Confectionary and Tobacco Workers’ Union became the site for Grennan and Sperandio’s artistic intervention.

While artists of Vita Brevis never break with the physical site in the way that Grennan and Sperandio do, many use communities to tell stories. Some artists address clearly defined communities, like Krzysztof Wodiczko’s involvement with grieving mothers from Bunker Hill, for his piece, Bunker Hill Monument Projection. Others dealt with communities more broadly; Jim Hodges’ piece, entitled Here We Are, celebrated the revolutionary forces—of both past and

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present—that helped shape the democratic landscape of the United States. Each artist of Vita Brevis negotiated their own parameters of community, and decided how intimately to integrate site-bound identity into their works.

Boston as a site is an intersection of landscape, history, and community. Boston so invested in its history, generally neglects contemporary public art. Vita Brevis corrected this imbalance by responding to the historic wealth of Boston and while also interacting with present day communities.
Chapter 3 – Temporality

The ephemeral nature of Vita Brevis’ projects begets the possibility for artworks that respond no only to physical context but to temporal context as well. While Vita Brevis’ temporary interjections into public space forfeit the aura of immortality accorded to traditional museum art, what they gained is of unquestionably greater value to public art in general: relevancy to a particular moment and a particular place. The pieces the program commissioned were free to engage diverse and ephemeral subjects because the art itself did not pretend to shoulder the burden of permanent relevancy. They dealt in the social currency of the everyday “now” in a more meaningful way than any permanent work could. Patricia C. Phillips describes the phenomenon in her article “Temporality and Public Art.” She writes: “Because the work is part of the urban fabric for short periods of time, there is a freedom to try new ideas…. Perhaps there is also the willingness to engage difficult ideas and current issues in ways more enduring projects cannot.” Temporality, then, can become a vital component in museum practice, as it facilitates involvement with the ever-changing present.

Temporary public art naturally promotes risk taking. Without aiming to achieve enduring relevance in the hallowed halls of a museum, artists are allowed the freedom to experiment. Temporary public art projects allow artists to take risks that are as much experiments as works of art. The ICA by engaging in temporary public art practice, affirmed a commitment to artists, supporting innovative approaches to art production. This commitment is especially important for a contemporary art museum like the ICA, whose general objective is to champion new approaches to making art. Yet the ICA’s—and many other institutions—mission intentionally or unintentionally, begets permanence. A collecting museum, which the ICA is, aims to amass a

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collection that must stand the test of time. Its structure is a repository for art, for when works are not exhibited they are kept safely in storage.

The most significant aspect of the ICA’s practice that engages temporality is the temporary exhibitions—that is, special exhibitions on view for a limited period. Because the exhibition has a set lifespan, it shares with temporary public art the opportunity to engage more fleeting subject matter, or ephemeral situations and social conditions which may not find a home in the fixed arc of art history. A temporal exhibition provides the ICA with its most effective tool in engaging with the contemporary cultural dialogue of its environment. Yet, even these lack the vitality of a single work of temporary public art. The institutional framework of the ICA all but ensures that a special exhibition will not be a laboratory for artistic innovation; often they are planned years in advance and are subject to bureaucratic limitations. The first of these problems—the drawn-out time frame of exhibition planning—severely hampers the ability of any museum to capture the zeitgeist at any particular moment. While the design of the exhibition can be provocative or adventurous, the artworks themselves are very often not new. The second—the bureaucratic process of planning—can easily compromise the singularity of perspective that is necessary to effective social commentary. What can make a socially- or culturally-engaged work of art successful is a distinct approach to its subject; even when the opinion of the artist is fraught, it is indivisibly cohesive.

Vita Brevis’ programs, on the other hand, were planned only a year in advance, and were very often subject to last-minute changes. Artist Anna Schuleit (b. 1974) changed her contribution to the “Art of the Harbor Island” exhibition in 2007 several times throughout the course of its realization. When her original plan for her work *Waterside* (Fig. 1)—consisting mainly of a large row of mirrors installed several dozen yards off the beach—proved
unrealizable (at least with funding and logistical constraints), Schuleit’s finished project turned out to be an installation housed in a yurt, set on the beach and filled with drawings and models. With this project, the ICA demonstrated a level of flexibility and adaptability often lacking in its white cube exhibition space. Carole Anne Meehan admits that the very nature of the temporary public artwork teaches a curator to “roll with the punches,” an attitude not about flippancy but investigation. The messy experimentations of pieces like Schuleit’s *Waterside* naturally suit impermanency.

The ICA’s exhibitions must also by design appeal to the broadest base of people. From art connoisseurs to novices, from locals to tourists, exhibitions must concern universal themes in order to draw in audience. This can lead to formulaic solutions that exclude provocative or exciting statements. Even in a special exhibition, the framework of the institution is bent toward historical relevancy. In addressing a specific concern, the aim is not often to make a particular statement or effect any change, but to capture the tenor of the times. This perspective tends to eliminate aggressively specialized topics. Certainly, this is not always the case, and there have been many exhibitions that disprove such generalities. Yet, temporality provides a greater forum for investigation into specifics and mitigates the necessity for the museum to please everybody.

Ann Carlson (b. 1954) for her *Vita Brevis* project *Remedy* (Fig. 2) focused on doctors and hospital personnel at the Boston’s Children’s Hospital and honored their individual ability to treat local children. The specificity of subject matter precludes universal relevance, and while non-natives can understand and engage with the work, the *Remedy* was ultimately created for Boston families. This project may not have been included in the canon of the ICA’s collection.

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40 Carole Anne Meehan, phone interview with the author, August 28, 2009.
due to highly specialized subject matter, but its impermanency allowed the ICA to use it as a tool to address localized issues underrepresented in its galleries.

Impermanent works can also convey a sense of immediacy. The short duration for which the projects are on view necessitates urgent viewings, maintaining the public’s attention with what Cher Knights calls a, “Hurry, hurry see them now before they disappear!” urgency.”41 No permanent collection can adequately convey that immediacy; even when a museum’s works are not on view, they are—as the public is fully aware—still there, resting behind the scenes. A temporary work demands immediate response, because not only is the work itself fleeting, but so is its subject. A work like Carlson’s Remedy is conceived as temporary because its entire raison d’etre is impermanent. As part of a permanent collection, Remedy would be rendered irrelevant almost instantly. Both the work and its subject guarantee a sense of imperativeness.

ICA’s institutional support for temporary projects resulted in fleeting moments of vanguard art production that thrived on the specifics of temporal and physical contexts. With Vita Brevis, ICA values are aligned not only with dominant modes of museum practice but also a vital component of contemporary public art practice, temporality. Vita Brevis provided artists with opportunities to create and experiment without a definitive end product in mind. As Phillips argues, “the temporary in public art is not about the absence of commitment or involvement, but about an intensification and enrichment of the conception of public.”42 Phillips correctly acknowledges that duration does not designate an artwork’s worth; whether a work is on view for decades or hours does not bespeak successful engagement with the public. Through supporting temporary public projects, like that of Vita Brevis, a museum opens its doors—literally and figuratively—to a new breed of specificity in art. Without taking on the

41 Knight, 40.
42 Phillips, 304.
onus of longevity, a work is free to engage with a particular time and particular place, giving the artist a freedom of investigation and experimentation that is often lacking in the ICA’s gallery setting.
Case Studies

The case studies that follow comprise an overview of Vita Brevis’ projects. The projects included herein are not meant to form a comprehensive outline or historical catalogue (See Appendix B for a compendium of all works) but to provide specific examples of ways in which ICA utilized Vita Brevis to address individual issues relevant to the Boston public. These case studies are organized into: memorials, public parks and social histories; each section will highlight four artworks as notable examples.

Case Study 1 – Memorials

When the design competition for the German national memorial to the murdered Jews of Europe opened in 1995, artist Horst Hoheisel (b. 1944) submitted a controversial proposal: blow up the Brandenburger Tor, grind its stone into dust, sprinkle the remains over the vanished site, and then cover the entire memorial with granite plates. In his book, At Memory’s Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture, James E. Young praises Hoheisel’s design, writing, “Only an unfinished memorial process can guarantee the life of memory.”43 Medvedow writes, in response, “The idea suggested by James Young that memory may best be served by absence or evolving process helped define the temporary nature of Vita Brevis.”44 As Young and Medvedow suggest, the act of memorializing is never over. Memory is an active process, one that is forever changing with the passage of time. Thus, the memorials of Vita Brevis each denied a fixedness of form and content, remaining unfinished in order to reflect accurately the transience of memory. Four artists—Jim Hodges (b. 1957); Mildred Howard (b.

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Barbara Steinman (b. 1950) and Krysztof Wodiczko (b. 1943)—accepted this premise for 
Let Freedom Ring, the inaugural project of Vita Brevis in 1998. For the project, the artists 
tackled Boston’s storied Freedom Trail. The trail itself is a series of memorials, monuments, and 
historic sites, illustrating and memorializing various episodes in the history of the city. While 
popular with tourists and residents alike, the memorials on the Freedom Trail speak the same 
message as they did decades ago and decades from now they will still carry substantively the 
same message. The artists of Vita Brevis’ Let Freedom Ring re-contextualized sites of memory 
on the Freedom Trail through temporary installations, challenging the immutability of the 
traditional memorial form.

Because the artists’ chosen sites were highly visible, historian Marilyn Richardson, in her 
essay for the Let Freedom Ring handout, writes, “Visitors brought to each of these sites a private 
mix of factoids recalled from history books or school field trips.”45 The memorials on the 
Freedom Trail have been thoroughly historicized by academic texts, guidebooks and visitor 
pamphlets. The sites are laden with historical significance. One thing these memorials do not 
address, however, is personal memory. To correct this imbalance, the artists of Vita Brevis 
sought to activate what Daniel Abramson calls a postmodern convergence of memory and 
history.46 While Abramson repudiates the pervasiveness of memory in modern memorials, he 
does call for blending of memory and history. The artists used the historic sites as a platform to 
interject collective and personal memories of contemporary Boston community, while also 
making visitors aware of history’s lessons and meanings. These works highlighted a category of 
memory—personal and recent—that is traditionally excluded from a public memorial.

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45 Marilyn Richardson, Untitled essay written for ICA’s Let Freedom Ring handout, September 1998.
46 Daniel Abramson, “Make History, Not Memory,” Harvard Design Magazine (Fall 1999), 3.
Given the profusion of public memorials in Boston, it is unsurprising that they tend to overshadow the city’s contemporary art, particularly in terms of the sheer number of people they reach. Instead of competing with the warhorses of Boston tourism, Vita Brevis sought to present contemporary art that directly responded to and engaged in the cultural and historic wealth of the city. Contemporary art is often overlooked in Boston’s memorial discourse. Memorials in the city are laden with content, yet do not necessarily serve as a space for art. Contemporary art in Boston is largely disengaged from the public address of public memory, and contemporary artists are not generally connected to the erection of new memorials in the city—one of the most prominent memorials built in the past decade, the *New England Holocaust Memorial* (1995), was designed by the architect Stanley Saitowitz. The relationship contemporary artists bear to nineteenth and early twentieth century memorials is even more tenuous. Hodges, Howard, Steinman and Wodiczko are all artists by trade and used their status as art makers to respond to historical memorials, inserting contemporary aesthetic practices into spaces not normally designated for the exhibition of “capital-A” Art.

Of the four Freedom Trail pieces, the works by Jim Hodges and Mildred Howard shared a common approach. Hodges and Howard approached sites that were never designated as memorials (Hodges’ Old North Church and Howard’s Old South Meeting House) and deliberately teased out the strands of memory associated with the space. Hodges and Howard investigated the intersection of historic commemoration—both sites are tourist destinations—and memorialization. Their works helped make the surprisingly small step between historical landmark and memorial of the past and present.

For his contribution, Jim Hodges chose the Bigelow Courtyard adjacent to the Old North Church. Famous for its steeple, where in 1775 Robert Newman signaled with lanterns the
approach of British soldiers, immortalized in public memory with the phrase, “One if by land,
two if by sea.” While Old North Church is a popular tourist destination, it is also still an active
congregation for Boston’s North End community. Hodges’ piece, entitled Here We Are (Fig. 3),
responded to the visual memory of the lanterns as a call for revolutionary action with the sounds
of sixty sets of wind chimes hung from the courtyard trees. Hodges explains, “The chimes are
spirits, memories called forth from an historic site, the voices of the missing.”

Nestled high in leafy branches, the wind chimes remained almost invisible; visitors were confronted with the
 canopy of sound made by chimes but its source was not immediately apparent. Hodges, by not
emphasizing the sound devices as visual objects, attempted to coax visitors into a state of
introspection, blending history with individual memory. Project director Carole Anne Meehan
said, “What people are going to take away or bring to the situation will not be the official story,
but their own stories and memories.” To complement this conflation, Hodges placed a wooden
plaque on the site’s entry with a poem that read:

Here We Are
At this place between places
A great historic monument
Ourselves.

The poem commemorated the great history of the church, turning the courtyard into a memorial
to the birth of the revolution, yet it also invoked the power of the present. Here We Are was
simultaneously a commemoration of the past and an affirmation of the now.

For her work S.S. (Fig. 4) artist Mildred Howard also transformed a historic
building—this time at the Old South Meeting House—into a temporary memorial. Built in 1729,

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48 Jill Medvedow and Carole Anne Meehan, eds, Vita Brevis: History Landscape, and Art 1998-
2003, 10.
the Old South Meeting House served as a place of meeting for figures like Benjamin Franklin and Samuel Adams. It was here colonists convened to plan the Boston Tea Party. Howard drew on the site’s rich history as a site for protest. Upon entering the building, a visitor was greeted by a section of gilded railroad tracks. The tracks served as a literal expression of the Underground Railroad. S.S. is an abbreviation for slave stealer, an epithet given to abolitionists by southern slave owners. The tracks followed the rectilinear architecture of the meetinghouse. At one end of the track stood a pile of blood red cannon balls, symbolizing the violence waged over a fight for freedom. At the other end, Howard placed a large gold mirror, suggesting that we too are involved in the fight for freedom. She said, “The mirror puts you right in the piece. It makes you look at yourself and then see how you fit into the whole picture.”

Like Hodges, Howard erected a memorial to the past events, while simultaneously implicating the present. The Underground Railroad is explicitly memorialized, yet because of the work’s temporality, it avoids becoming a definitive memorial. Instead, S.S. allowed for a construction of memory that is fluid. After its disassembly, S.S. as a commemorative agent exists only in the memory of its visitors. It is, as Young terms, a memorial left unfinished.

The remaining two artists, Steinman and Wodiczko, chose to work with existing memorial structures on the Boston Freedom Trail. Steinman used the Parkman Bandstand on the Boston Common to tackle the making of collective memory in Colonnade (Fig. 5). Built in 1912 by Derby, Robinson, & Shephard, the Bandstand stands in commemoration of George Francis Parkman, Jr., who when he died in 1908 left five million dollars to Boston’s public parks, expressing a hope that the Common would always remain one of them. However, it is doubtful that many citizens make this connection in contemporary Boston. Steinman decided to use the

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structure’s anonymity to refute the presence of a sole narrative, imposing on its surface a multitude of stories. Using the innumerable historic memorials in the Boston Common and Gardens as her source, Steinman photographed and traced the faces and plaques. She then rearranged the material into new images and phrases like “speak to coming generations” and “welcome memory as a guest,” and transferred them onto 12-foot-high white satin banners that hung from the twelve Ionic columns of the Bandstand. As Meehan describes, “The manipulated words and images dramatically altered both the original meaning of the plaques and the solid appearance of the Bandstand.”

Disregarding the conceptual impetus behind Colonnade, the piece was aesthetically striking; at night the banners were brightly illuminated, as if lit from within.

Calling the work a “soft memorial,” Steinman sought to commemorate a plurality of convictions or ideas, rather than one specific individual. She said that a soft memorial should be unconcerned with explicitness; it should “express doubt or be inconclusive.”

In keeping with the theme of Let Freedom Ring, Steinman printed a detailed picture of a wing from Robert Kraus’ (1850-1902) Boston Massacre Monument (1888) on the exterior of each of the panels, but refused to show the viewer the whole picture of the eagle, thus subverting traditional symbolism and favoring a more abstract concept of freedom. Colonnade re-imagined the invisible memorial, one whose significance has been lost through time, and imposed on the Parkman Bandstand a new meaning, one that has been cobbled together from the memories hidden within the traditional memorials in the Common. Steinman wanted to bring life the collective memory of Boston’s past.

50 Carole Anne Meehan, phone interview with the author, August 28, 2009.
With his *Bunker Hill Monument Projection* (Fig. 6) Krzysztof Wodiczko took one of the Freedom Trail’s venerated pieces—the titular obelisk—from the past into the present. Though only on view for three nights, the project spoke to the very heart of Boston. In preparation his piece, Wodiczko spent several months researching and interacting with the residents of Boston, specifically in the neighborhood of Charlestown where the Bunker Hill Monument is located. He eventually chose as his subject the high number of unsolved murders of young men in the Charlestown area over the previous 20 years. The deaths remain unsolved due to a so-called “code of silence” that prevailed amongst the Charlestown residents. For three nights, Wodiczko projected the faces and voices of three Charlestown grieving mothers onto the towering Bunker Hill Monument, giving a voice to the legacy of secrecy within the community. As a memorial to the fallen men of the Revolutionary War, Bunker Hill became reconfigured as a monument to the sons of the contemporary Charlestown community, a connection of past with present, national with local. Most importantly, Wodiczko’s project was not a memorial in the way that the Bunker Hill had been; the obelisk had offered a public space and a formidable symbol for reflection, but the Bunker Hill projection was as much a call to action as it was a remembrance. Speaking about the *Bunker Hill Monument Projection*, Wodiczko said, “There would be a link between their specific problems and the problems other people have elsewhere, so that it would be a truly public project. In other words, I wanted to use the monument to transmit messages that are of vital importance to everybody.”

Each of the four *Let Freedom Ring* pieces, but particularly in Wodiczko’s *Bunker Hill Projection*, found a way to transform the traditional role of a monument..... The four pieces’ deliberate impermanence of form implicitly critiques the power of traditional monumental

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materials—glass stone, steel—to preserve the complexity of memory. The artists attempted to verify Young’s theory that the unfinished memorial best serves the process of memorialization, because they moved beyond the territory of remembrance and into the significantly more difficult area of not allowing us to forget. With Hoheisel’s Holocaust memorial proposal unrealized—prevailing memorial trends still necessitate a built memorial—Vita Brevis is its logical heir. The four works that sprung from the minds of Hodges, Howard, Steinman and Wodiczko may be as close as public memorial will ever come to the extremity of Hoheisel’s concept, because they acknowledge that memory is based on remembering just as much as it is on not forgetting.
Case Study 2 – Parks and Landscapes

Unlike the re-imaginings of historic monuments and memorials of the first group of artists, the next group responded more directly to the physical landscape of Boston’s public landscapes and parks. In a metropolis like Boston, parks offer a respite from the rigidity of the urban landscape. The grid pattern that has come to define urban planning for the majority of Boston stands at odds with the biomorphic forms of its parks. As one walks through an urban jungle of Boston, the repetition of city block after city block is conjoined with cacophonous noises of car horns, construction tools, and human chatter. Monochromatic concrete, cold steel, and the dull ruddiness of colonial-style brick facades dominate the color palette of the city. The physical sensation of being in a green space, whether it be the popular Common or the more secluded Arnold Arboretum—their color variations, their vulnerability to the elements—are all aspects of the park environment not found anywhere else in the urban landscape. Citizens can enjoy recreations—eating, drinking, running, strolling, reading, resting—in an idealized rural landscape that stands in contrast to a concrete-entombed city. Boston’s many parks provided unique opportunity for the ICA to engage in the physical landscape of the city in a way it had never before, turning park-goers into art audiences.

At any given moment, the occupants of Boston parks also represent a unique cross section of urban inhabitants or tourists. Because the park is a public ground, designed for the benefit of the city itself, it becomes a common denominator in sharing city space. Pioneering 19th-century landscape architect Frederick Law Olmstead, on completing Boston’s Emerald Necklace in 1870, wrote:

The prospect of coming together, all classes largely represented with a common purpose, not at all intellectual, competitive with none, disposing of jealousy and spiritual or
intellectual pride toward none, each individual adding by his mere presence to the pleasures of all others, all helping to the greater happiness of each. 

Olmstead, the father of modern urban parks, conceived of commons as a utopian space for citizens to be free from the class, religious, and social structures that work to separate people from each other. He believed in the park as a social equalizer, a positive presence in the confines of an isolating city.

However, different uses of the park have different degrees of legitimacy according to the City of Boston Department of Parks and Recreations—the caretakers of Boston’s many parks. Some activities conform to Olmstead’s view of the park as respite from urban life, but some forms of recreation may interfere. Skateboarders remain a constant ire for park officials; one can almost always spot signs reading “No Skateboarding Allowed,” to warn off those who would disrupt the tranquility of the park setting. While the park can be a place for people to commune or enjoy, as a public space it is also a place for indigent people to find shelter. More than just a get away, the park is also, at times, a home, a bath, and a place to panhandle. While Olmstead envisioned the park as democratic model, in reality, it can be fraught with social conflict. This convergence of interests makes the park a much more charged territory than Olmstead’s peaceful vision.

The intersection of landscape, public interaction, and natural beauty provide fertile ground for the display of art. John Stilgoe in his essay, “Park Setting Time,” states that the park’s natural rhythms—its seasons, the length of daylight, the ebb and flow of human activity—invites participation with art. He writes, “[P]arks work a special magic. By being old fashioned, just a

54 City of Boston, Parks and Recreations, [http://www.cityofboston.gov/parks/](http://www.cityofboston.gov/parks/)
little out of date, they enable a very special kind of creativity. Parks sharpen the imagination by restoring a fertile distance from immediacy, from the strains of daily life in complex times.”

In entering a park in an urban environment, one is entering a space that is different than its surrounding location. Public art can be used to heighten this distinction by bringing awareness to one’s surroundings. By being made to stop and take notice, a visitor can discover the park in a new way; through public art, a familiar location can become foreign, and then, through reorientation, familiar once more. Stilgoe elaborates, “[S]uperb art encountered in the park by a mind in process of enjoying the park arrests the psyche and reorients it.” By placing the art in a generally enjoyable public environment, an artist can greatly affect an audience by the disruption of that placidity. The incongruity of Vita Brevis’ artworks in a park setting disrupted the faux naturalism of the park, heightening the incongruity of the park itself in an urban environment.

The park, taken as location and subject matter, can serve to focus a visitor on the physicality of the setting. The artists of Vita Brevis responded in kind, using the physical landscape as a platform and inspiration for site-specific artworks. The public landscape provided a rich ground for artists to respond to and add to the often-overlooked history embedded in Boston’s public parks. While a landscape is designed to be neutral, there are forgotten stories, lost politics, and hidden agendas that exist in its soil, trees, and ponds. The artists of Vita Brevis take up as their subject the physicality of space, and reveal how such physicality is never neutral. Boston’s parks provided not only the host for the projects but served, in many cases, as the subject of the art itself.

In *Art on the Emerald Necklace*, presented in the summer of 2000 as the 3rd annual ICA/Vita Brevis project, artists James Boorstein (b. 1955), Ann Carlson (b.1954), Ellen Driscoll

56 Ibid.
(b.1953), Barnaby Evans (1955), Sheila Kennedy (b. 1957) and Frano Violich (b. 1957), Cornelia Parker (b. 1956), and Nari Ward (b. 1963) were asked to respond to Olmstead’s Emerald Necklace, a series of nine parks and greenways created in almost twenty years of work (1878-1896). Three of the nine sites—the Boston Common, the Public Garden, and Commonwealth Avenue Mall—predate Olmstead, and Olmsted added to them six parks, each distinct yet connected, to form continuous seven-mile parkway. Olmsted’s additions were designed in a more fluid style than their formal predecessors. As New York Times critic Ann Wilson Lloyd remarked, “Olmstead’s designs were planned to engineer how people moved through them, with wide malls in which to gather, meandering pathways that encourage contemplation of picturesque, natural looking (but often highly manufactured) vistas.” Whether the park has been designed to appear naturalistic as with the Emerald Necklace or clearly landscaped as the Commonwealth Avenue Mall, Boston’s green spaces reflect Olmsted’s democratic belief that public parks provide common ground connecting people and nature.

The artists of Art on the Emerald Necklace sought to preserve Olmsted’s legacy by making minimalist interventions into the landscape, re-interpreting ways of seeing and moving through the green space. Echoing the land/earthworks of 1960s and 1970s by artists such as Dennis Oppenheim and Robert Morris, the works of Art on the Emerald Necklace provided a visceral and highly sensory experience. Unlike the works of earlier decades, however, the artists of Vita Brevis were less taken with scale and violence of nature, relating more to the individual’s interpretation of nature rather than trying to convey the enormity of nature itself. Christine Temin of the Boston Globe noted that the works of Art on the Emerald Necklace are particularly

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effective because they are, “all but invisible and virtually egoless, their point to make you notice something else.”  

The artists shared their consideration of public parks as spaces for art experiences, but each approached the landscape differently. Boorstein attempted to heighten and crystallize the viewer’s awareness of his landscape without adding anything to it. For him, the park acted as an intimate meditation coach, slowing and focusing his viewer’s concentration. For Eliasson, the park landscape is a political one; he draws attention to the civic responsibility to the park and its importance as a public space. The new land he created was both complement and contrast to the old. Allora and Calzadilla used the park as their canvas, a platform for civic discourse. Finally, Rueb approached the park as a bearer of history, and revealed the unspoken personal stories tied to the landscape beneath us.

Boorstein’s installation, Emanations (Fig. 7), was such a subtle change to the architecture of the park it required physical proximity and focus for its effects to register. The artist chose Ward’s Pond as his site, a secluded spot along a rugged path, isolated among trees. To see the piece, visitors had to walk deep into overgrown woods right up to the water’s edge. In Emanations, Boorstein mechanically created a series of concentric ripples on the pond’s surface, disrupting the tranquility of the water. The circular emanations suggested stones thrown repeatedly; the ripples expanding into ever widening circles. The splashes occurred in three different places in the pond, at seemingly random intervals, and at times, the ripples gracefully overlapped. The quiet scene invited focus, testing our ability to slow down and watch. Boorstein noted, “Experiencing Emanations was a little bit like whale watching. You know you are on a boat, and you wonder, ‘Where is the damn whale?’ I think many were probably disappointed in

that there was a lot of waiting." The waiting became an integral part of the piece, as Boorstein hoped to harness impatience and transform it into serene focus and attention of the landscape. Meehan says, “With the intermittent disruption of the water, visitors began to notice the small details of the park like turtles, fish, and the foliage.” Boorstein used the simplicity of natural form to heighten one’s awareness of the surrounding park. The existing landscape, with all its rich intricacies, was more than the platform from which to view the work; it was the work. Boorstein, enhanced the landscape’s “naturalness,” an inherent contradiction much like Olmstead’s own manufactured terrains. Emanations mirrored the beauty of Olmsted’s simulated natural forms.

Of course not every visitor enjoyed the work of Art on the Emerald Necklace. In response to Ellen Driscoll’s (b. 1953) project, Meanderlink (Fig. 8), for which she flew banners of her own design from the back of small planes, Boston resident Robert Canterby asked the Boston Globe, “We who live near the parkland, and those who seek its quiet enjoyment, must endure this intrusion for seven weeks of our summer?” Because the park is a public space, paid for and owned by the citizens of Boston, many people develop a personal relationship with it in the same way that they do with their own property. They feel intrusion upon the park is an intrusion upon them. Though perhaps not as violently felt as invasion upon own land, for many, the knee-jerk response is “Who asked me?” There is certainly something almost undemocratic about the uninvited interruption of a public art exhibition into residents’ everyday lives. However, Marty Blatt, who, as the Chief of Cultural Resources at Boston National Historic Park worked closely

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60 “Conversation Between James Boorstein and Carole Anne Meehan, in Vita Brevis, Jill Medvedow and Carole Anne Meehan eds., 54.
61 Carole Anne Meehan, phone interview with the author, August 28, 2009. eds,
with the curator and artists of Vita Brevis, believed, though the projects were provocative, they were “generally well received and helped people focus and refocus on the Emerald Necklace.”

While the artists of Art on the Emerald Necklace were asked to respond to existing parkland, for the 4th annual ICA/Vita Brevis project in 2001, Olafur Eliasson (b.1967) constructed an entirely new landscape. With *The young land* (Fig. 9), Eliasson docked 22 tons of lava rock spread over a 30-by-90 foot barge that bobbed in the waves caused by passing boats in the Downtown Boston Harbor. Visitors were invited to explore the new land by crossing a bridge onto the barge and walking over a field of black rocks ranging in size. The rough topography of the piece demanded visitors be acutely aware of movement and balance, as rough waters caused the barge to roll up and down in the passing waves.

The title referred to age of volcanic rocks, which were brought from an inactive volcano on the artist’s native Iceland. Around 200 years old, the rocks are geologically young compared with the landscape of Boston. It was crucial to Eliasson that the piece be on water because, “it’s not quite in America yet. It’s still unstable.” Eliasson’s floating landscape appeared alien, suspect next to the established landmass of Boston.

The visitors who chose to experience *The young land* as Eliasson intended—by stepping onto it, and feeling the pitch and roll of Boston Harbor underfoot—were exposed to a perceptual shift between natural and built environments, much the same as the daily visitors to a city park. Eliasson heightened the incongruity, however, by creating a new landscape that is at once more aggressively artificial than a city street and more oddly natural than urban parkland. The nearly absurd location and the limited square footage of the space are contrived to a remarkable degree,

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63 Marty Blatt, email message to the author, February 1, 2010.
and yet the artist has clearly gone to great lengths to preserve a very specific natural
environment. Visitors stepping aboard the barge were invited into an interstitial space between
urbanity and naturalism.

After the attacks of September 11, *The young land* was abruptly removed as U.S. Federal
Marshals held the ICA’s tugboat operator at gunpoint. Medvedow remarks, “With its long view
of the history of the earth…and encountering unfamiliar turf, Olafur Eliasson’s *The young land*
was a prescient, if brief, metaphor for a post 9/11 world.”

For the 7th annual ICA/Vita Brevis Project in 2004, artists Jennifer Allora (b. 1974) and
Guillermo Calzadilla (b.1971) returned to Boston’s parks for inspiration for their piece, *Chalk*
(Fig. 10). The project utilized a simple but effective concept—that of literalizing the view of
public art as a “public creation.” Allora and Calzadilla commissioned dozens of over-sized logs
of common classroom chalk, over five feet long and thicker than a telephone pole, and placed
these on the paved sidewalks in Boston Common over the July 4th weekend. These pieces of
chalk encouraged a democratic expression of ideas by inviting spontaneous writing and drawing
from anyone who chose to pick them up. The sidewalks of the park became a forum for the
community to voice their ideas or just draw pictures. Perhaps unlike past exhibitions, the timing
for this project was very deliberate, says curator Meehan: “Our strategy was to capitalize on the
moment just prior to the Democratic National Convention taking place in Boston, when free
speech, open democratic communication, and the right to demonstrate was very much on
people’s minds.” The location was also specifically chosen for its historical allusions. The
Boston Common was established in 1634 by the City as a permanent public park. The land has a

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65 Jill Medvedow and Carole Anne Meehan, eds, *Vita Brevis: History Landscape, and Art 1998-
2003*, 15.
66 Carole Anne Meehan, part of “Contemporary Art and History Museums?” lecture at the
rich history as a site of assembly and demonstration, and the chalk provided contemporary residents of Boston a way to contribute to this great historical tradition.

The level of participation was overwhelming; the park was practically whited-out over the three days. People used the chalk for innocuous drawings and impassioned political statements, and everything in between. Statements like “We are not the world,” “Lesbians against Bush,” “Kerry beat Bush 04” covered the ground. The impermanency of the chalk medium also provided a sharp dichotomy to the historical permanency of park; after one rain shower the elaborate and extensive chalk markings that had pervaded the Common disappeared.

The transient nature of Chalk proved, with its high participation from the public, that temporary public art is an effective way to achieve social currency. The sidewalk provided a forum for individuals to express either politically-charged feelings or generic doodles, thus becoming a litmus test for the social climate in Boston.

Exhibiting Chalk in a public space, and without the filter of curatorial authority or censorship, is an essential aspect of this work, which takes it inspiration from the child’s activity. Chalk’s participants are members of the community, and without them, the work itself literally would not materialize. In making residents of Boston key players in the creation of the artwork, their personal expressions were publicized in the highly trafficked grounds of the public park. With Chalk, the park served as a geographically and intellectually accessible environment for citizens and tourists alike.

For the last ICA/Vita Brevis project in 2007, Curator Meehan continued the tradition of exhibiting in public parks, but this time the artists—Ernesto Pujol (b. 1957), Teri Rueb (b.), Anna Schuleit (b. 1974), and the artist group Office DA maintained strong ties to the museum.

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Art on the Harbor Islands was located on the collection of islands located just off shore in the Boston Harbor, within direct sightline of the ICA’s new home on the waterfront. For the first time in its history, the projects of Vita Brevis developed a geographic relationship with the museum, challenging the autonomy of the installations. As well, though part of the Boston Public Parks and Recreations, the Harbor Islands still require a fee for the ferry ride in order to visit. For the first time, visitors had to pay for access to the exhibition. The site itself limits the “publicness” of installations.

Rueb’s installation on Spectacle Island developed a direct relationship with its surroundings. For Core Sample (Fig. 11), Rueb created what she calls an “audio core sample” of what is under the island’s surface layer. Spectacle Island previously housed farms, a quarantine hospital, resort hotels, and a garbage dump; it wasn’t until the summer of 2006 that the island was opened as a public park. The audio core sample, heard over personal headsets and dictated by global positioning satellite, evoked natural sounds, music, and narrative oral testimony to blend historical survey into present conditions. The sounds of wind howling, water lapping, the clink and grind of construction, birds and human voices heightened the aural experience of the park’s landscape. The piece was an artificial soundtrack to the island’s past and present, and the headsets allowed it to be both a personal and collective journey into time. Yet what made Core Sample a unique project for Vita Brevis was its sister installation at the ICA. Rueb installed a similar soundscape before the ceiling to floor harbor-view windows at the ICA building. The sounds of Spectacle Island emanated from the floor before an impressive ocean view. The islands seemed to sing out like a Siren, calling the viewer out to sea. This installation provided a

provocative connection between the enclosed museum building and the openness of its public counterpart.

The works of Vita Brevis investigate the system of ownership of a public landscape, not just as a conceptual idea, but the ways in which we make a public park our own. Do we know it physically, in the way the Boorstein’s *Emanations* invited us to explore it foot by foot; or do we know it more intimately, the way in which Allora and Calzadilla’s *Chalk* invited us to mark it, in the almost primitive way children do. Eliasson’s *The young land* challenged the very idea of public landscape; the water of the Boston Harbor is actually public space, though we hardly interact with it in the same way we do with a park. He showed that even in a space that “belongs” to us we can feel very isolated and foreign. *Core Sample* by Rueb examined the empirical or historical way that we can know one very specific island, revealing the limits of our knowledge; Harbor Island is a public park, but Rueb demonstrated that most know nothing of the complex, storied history underfoot. These works invited us, in very different ways, to become more immediately acquainted with all the aspects of a space that has been set up as “common ground,” as Olmsted professed. The works collectively asked us to investigate our own feelings of ownership, and the ways in which we demonstrate and support those feelings. As these pieces invited us to reclaim our own space, they intended for better understanding of the connection with the built environment and natural terrain. In this way, the ICA was able to engage with Boston’s parks and landscapes, something that would be impossible to represent in the galleries.
Chapter 6– Social Histories

While the artists working with monuments, memorials and public parks address literal sites, the artists in the social histories category are concerned with philosophical sites. The work in this group is less about addressing the physicality of a location than recasting or re-imagining the history of Boston society through its cultural artifacts, held up as manifestations of its cultural identity. Because this group portrayed personal stories inspired by or connected to site, they are not addressing the location in a mere physical manner, but as a vehicle for social histories. This makes this collection of artists distinctly different than the first two.

For Vita Brevis’ second project in December 1999, artist Shimon Attie (b. 1957) used social history to speak to a larger issue. For his site, Attie chose the façade of the (now former) ICA building at 955 Boylston Street in the Back Bay neighborhood. The building, built in 1885 in the style of H.H. Richardson, served as inspiration to Attie, and he dug into its history as a former police station in the early twentieth century. Attie spent months combing through archives of written and photographic documents and journal entries from policemen, judges, and social workers, all detailing the seventy-nine years of the station’s history. Titling his project An Unusually Bad Lot (Fig. 12), Attie projected mug shots and written accounts from the archived police reports onto the building’s brick façade. Displaying entries like, “She did not seem to feel ashamed being arrested for fornication, not even with a colored man,” and “He is something of a verbalist and has a reputation for being a homosexual,” Attie exposes turn-of-the-century attitudes about criminality. By projecting the ghost-like images onto the building’s face, Attie reveals Boston’s socially charged history and the unexamined prejudices that exist in its fabric. Like Wodiczko’s transformation of the Bunker Hill monument, however, its implications for modern-day Boston went beyond pure journalistic investigation. In choosing the ICA’s façade
for his projections, Attie was asking the viewer to compare the antiquated prejudice of the building’s former tenants with the prevailing public opinion of contemporary art. While unearthing past offenses, he questions whether the pejorative view of museum and art culture as socially detached might one day be judged as similarly out-of-date. In both of these respects, the intimate building becomes a parable to the contemporary Boston community, provoking pedestrians to question the unspoken prejudices that exist in the society today.

Four years later, and in direct response to the events of September 11th, Ann Carlson in collaboration with Mary Ellen Strom used choreography and videography for the 5th annual Vita Brevis Project, Remedy (Fig. 2). Unlike Wodiczko or Attie, who dealt with specific local Boston events in order to relate them to a larger national significance, Carlson chose to address a national event and localize it to the Boston community. “For eighteen months they interviewed and shadowed individuals directly involved in healing bodies and souls in Boston.” She observed doctors, nurses, medical students, and staff at the Children’s Hospital in order to examine the quotidian movements of their everyday jobs at the Hospital. Basic gestures, such as standing, walking, talking, that an individual does everyday became the focus of Carlson’s piece. She says, “It’s that Jocyean idea that if you know someone’s day, you know them.” Carlson choreographed a series of movements based on the idiosyncrasies of each participant. Each participant then took turns performing the dance for video artist and Carlson’s collaborator, Mary Ellen Strom. Carlson says she worked with no professional dancers, in part to connect with life outside dance: “I’m trying to get back to myself as a citizen, to integrate my training as a dancer

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with ‘real’ life, to understand how what I learned applies to everyone.”\textsuperscript{71} By using actual hospital personnel, Carlson forges a greater connection to the residents of Boston, who may know one of the staff members or even been treated by one of the doctors. Yet, in order to extend the portrait to doctors and hospital personnel everywhere, Strom focused on small, often unidentifiable, parts of the body rather than a full frame representation. The edited video was then exhibited to the public on a billboard size LED screen that sat on the back of a 40-foot truck that was driven around the city. By displaying the portraits on a massive scale—and in a medium often used for advertising—Carlson elevates the everyday lives of a few individuals working at a hospital to universal celebration of individuality. She reveals the contemporary heroism and individual power to heal in the everyday people of Boston, but unlike many other tributes to the victims of the terrorist attacks, she replaces broad sympathy with a methodical and exuberant catharsis. For Carlson, pure sympathy is a distancing mechanism, like the erection of a memorial. It allows the viewer to reflect without asking for emotional or intellectual involvement in the event it memorializes, and so abstains from meaningful relevance to the community. Carlson’s nonprofessional “dancers,” taken so boldly into the very streets of Boston, are nothing if not deeply involved in the day-to-day life of this community.

In 2004, for its sixth installment, Vita Brevis commissioned a work by sound artist Ellen Band (b. 1952). Titled \textit{Portal of Prayer} (Fig. 13), Band’s piece was the first audio-based project commissioned by Vita Brevis, and was also the first to be exhibited simultaneously at three different locations—the corridor of Boston Public Library, the lobby of Dorchester’s Codman Square Health Center, and a terminal at Logan International Airport. Artists working with Vita Brevis had traditionally chosen historic sites or dealt with Boston’s nationally historic past.

Band’s *Portal of Prayer*, much like *Remedy* a year before it, is distinctive for its dynamic engagement with the contemporary social climate in Boston.

For her piece, Band visited fifteen different houses of worship of Boston to record sounds of worship. Attending temples, mosques, and churches, Band observed and met with clergy and worshipers. She collected sounds of prayers, songs, blessings, chats, chimes, organs and gongs from church services, sounds as varied as the swelling chords of a hallelujah hymn to the quiet reverberations of a Buddhist temple to an individual imam chanting from the Koran. For Band, it was essential that the sounds originate entirely from on-site field recordings to reflect accurately Boston’s congregants. Yet, persuading various places of worship to grant her access to their services was a challenge. Some of the clergy or congregation members were suspicious of her intentions. Band says, “Prayer is precious and this kind of art is very distant from a lot of people who attend religious services. It was ultimately an experiment of bringing two different worlds together.”

After amassing over thirty hours of material, Band then manipulated the recordings into a 78-minute sound installation, blending, stretching, braiding, layering the sonic tracks to create a symphony of worship.

While the piece retains a heightened consciousness of site that is inherent in more traditional site-specific works, the places in which it was exhibited—while not completely arbitrary—were not fixed. A health center, an airport, and a library are not thought of as traditional places of worship, yet the things we pray for—health, safety, the betterment of children, the nearness of family—are enacted in these exhibition spaces. The most challenging aspect of the project, according to Meehan, was finding appropriate institutions that would exhibit *Portal of Prayer*. “We were turned down flat by a few different locations.” The idea of

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72 Ellen Band, phone interview with the author, February 7, 2010.
hearing prayers in public places, Meehan says, troubled some potential sponsors. The settings were carefully chosen to diffuse controversy—deliberately avoiding such politically contentious hot spots like public schools. One of the many things that art and religion share is the specialization of space—historically, the practice of religion, and the act of worship, has been confined to dedicated centers of spirituality: churches, synagogues and mosques. Religious practice in secular—particularly public—space is not only a taboo, but a point of legal contention. Worship itself could accurately be termed “site-specific.” Art, in the same way, has been traditionally confined to very dedicated spaces. Museums and galleries are designed and used only for the appreciation of art. With her piece, Band breaks both of these conventions in one gesture; the work allows us a new experience of both art and worship in new physical contexts. The sounds of religious experience, decontextualized from their formal settings, retained the power of meditative experience.

The sites were also chosen for the physical properties as hallways or walkways between spaces. The spaces themselves were not designed for contemplative thought but go-betweens meant to ferry movement forward. *Portal of Prayer* was installed in an elevated walkway from central parking to the international terminal at Logan Airport, the northwest corridor of the Boston Public Library, and the entrance hallway to the Codman Square Health Center. Because the spaces didn’t necessitate a close listening—the airport in particular is also a spot for frenzied hurry—the piece became less an art installation than environmental sounds. In this way, Band undermines how we’ve been taught to view art. Instead of lavishing reverential attention on the piece, viewers rushed quickly through the space. By taking away the concentrated attention usually accorded to art pieces, Band de-emphasizes the sounds and produces an unconventional

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73 Carole Anne Meehan, phone interview with the author, August 28, 2009.
art experience.

Band does not limit herself to the juxtaposition of physical context, however; by recording the sounds of worship and broadcasting them not only in a different physical space, but wedded with correlative sounds from other religions, she further strips away the rarified nature of each religion. She says, “Prayer is human and natural. I’m trying to show a confluence of voices, a converging of traditions.”

Blending different voices raised in praise, despair, and supplication, speaking different languages, singing different songs, playing different instruments, Band created a unified picture of religion, less a patchwork view than a holistic one. Though taken from fifteen disparate faiths, the sounds derived from Band’s excursions presented cohesion of spirituality and highlighted the universal role of prayer in society. Band’s piece, in particular, is a strong example of one that uses subject matter as site more than site as subject matter. The definition of site-specificity often narrowly defines site as physical space, and in Band’s work, the expression of spirituality is almost a space unto itself, a psychological site.

Another piece that examined the psychological site as a manifestation of site-specificity, substituting cultural heritage for religious practice, was Niho Kozuru’s (b. 1969) installation, Re-Turning the Past: Cultural Icons Recast. The project was a result of Vita Brevis’ annual partnership with Boston National Historic Park for their Artist-in-Residence program. Each year Vita Brevis and the Park service would invite an artist from the New England area to create public works of art that explore Boston’s historical themes. The Artist-in-Residence program, also under the direction of Meehan, was different for its focus on fostering the talents of local artists by letting them explore the riches of Boston’s historic sites. Meehan says, “The park program was unique from the regular projects done by Vita Brevis in that it focused on fostering

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74 Ellen Band, phone interview with the author, February 7, 2010.
appreciation for the local creative talents.”  She goes on to explain, “Boston National Historic Park is associated with sites along the Freedom Trail. Our agreement was that we let three or four artists explore the area, and depending on what they found interesting, the Park Service helped us negotiate with specific sites.” For the fourth public art project presented by the joint initiative of the ICA and the Boston National Historic Park, Kozuru selected the historic Paul Revere House and Museum for the site of her installation for the Artist-in-Residence program; “Re-Turning the Past: Cultural Icons Recast,” was displayed on the secluded grounds of Paul Revere House, from June 22, 2004 through October 11, 2004.

The Paul Revere Memorial Association was founded in 1902 by John P. Reynolds, the great-grandson of Paul Revere. In 1908, he opened the doors of the former home of Revere to the public, thus establishing the Paul Revere House and Museum. The Paul Revere House is now one of the city’s few remaining structures from the seventeenth century. However, instead of merely investigating the mythology of Revere as a national historic figure, Kozuru used his home to reflect on her own personal history. Kozuru comes from family of artisans who have made ceramics in Fukuoka, Japan for centuries. In 1980, she moved with family to a colonial farmhouse in New England. She cites this early experience of being surrounded by American colonial architecture as deeply influencing her sculptural work. In her exhibition, *Re-Turning the Past*, Kozuru presented an assemblage of cast forms that revisited the original meaning of colonial architectural ornaments, casting them as part of her intimate personal history while also speaking to the greater legacy of immigration in the United States and the universality of craftsmanship.

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75 Carole Anne Meehan, phone interview with author, August 28, 2009.
76 Carole Anne Meehan, phone interview with the author, August 28, 2009.
77 Undated exhibition pamphlet for *Re-Turning the Past: Cultural Icons Recast*. 
In preparation for the exhibition, Kozuru visited the collections of the Vassall-Craigie-Longfellow House in Cambridge, Massachusetts and the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities in Boston to study colonial architectural elements such as finials, urns, spirals, and pendants. Kozuru then casted these forms in richly colored resin and translucent rubber, capturing their minute details and textures. Four sculptures were exhibited in the garden and courtyard of the Paul Revere House: Longfellow Balustrade Column (Fig. 14), cast in yellow, pink, and red; the large pink Urn (Fig. 15), the Revere House Window (Fig. 16) in yellow and green, and the deep cranberry red Double Finial (Fig. 17). Recasting architectural features that are commonplace in New England, such as balustrades and finials, in a material as incongruous as resin or rubber, allowed the viewer to experience these decorative elements anew. In using such malleable materials, Kozuru draws out the natural grain of the original wooden textures, and its translucency reflected and refracted light, exposing a view into the interior of these forms. The post-industrial age materials help integrate colonial architecture into the contemporary landscape of the city. The cast rubber, which had an organic, fleshy appearance sharply, contrasted the usual rigidity of colonial decorative and functional elements, helping bring the Paul Revere House and its era into a lively dialogue with contemporary artistic expression.

Yet, Kozuru’s works were more than formal constructions. She works in the continuum of cultural investigation and criticism, while also being highly autobiographical. Her personal identification with historic architectural forms conflates her family’s history with the broader themes of the American spirit and inventiveness. Famous for his midnight ride, Paul Revere was also a successful craftsman, working as a silversmith. Contributing not only to the cause of American liberty, Revere also helped define the cultural and industrial landscape of the new
nation. Yet, the manipulation of materials is not unique to the United States or the American spirit that Revere represents. Working with your hands is a cross-cultural practice, and Kozuru comes to craftsmanship as honestly as Paul Revere did. While implications of decorative arts may be different in Japanese society than American society, Kozuru’s work actualizes both of these traditions. The truest way that she had of investigating her identity as an immigrant was by finding correlatives from American culture. Coming upon the thread of craftsmanship and its central role in American identity becomes significant in establishing herself as an American artist and carrying on that tradition and honoring her identification as a Japanese immigrant. Finding where these two ends meet, Kozuru addresses distinctly American forms through the lens of multicultural as well as a mutigenerational reimagining of national history.

Medvedow says, “This partnership between ICA/Vita Brevis and Boston National Historic Park not only takes art beyond the museum walls, it challenges viewers to see Boston’s history in a new way.”78 While the project took the art outside of the walls of the ICA, it was still exhibited within the confines of the Paul Revere House Museum. Kozuru’s project enabled the unique collaboration between a contemporary art museum and a history museum, broadening the activities of both institutions. The Assistant Director of the Paul Revere House, Edith J. Steblecki believed the pairing was particularly beneficial to the Paul Revere House. She believes, “It was a great idea and a way for two very different museums to collaborate. It was something different for us. We had never had contemporary art on our property. It was cool and hip when historic houses could be viewed as stuffy places.”79 While Kozuru’s pieces brought new life to the normally staid history museum, placing contemporary art in a museum not generally associated with avant-garde artistic practice also allowed the piece to reach a wider audience. The majority

78 Undated press release.
of visitors to the Paul Revere House did not go there specifically to see the artworks, remarks Steblecki. “I don’t remember having the sense that visitors walking the Freedom Trail really knew about the art projects. Most of them probably learned about it as they got to each site.”

By placing her work on the property of a history museum, Kozuru was able to interject an element of surprise, creating visual juxtaposition of the old and new. The four works were displayed in the outside courtyard and garden of the house, which allowed the public to engage the pieces on their own, without staff present. With a lack of direct supervision from museum guards, many visitors interacted with the sculptures in a way that would be impermissible in a gallery setting. “Niho’s sculptures were colorful and playful,” Steblecki remembers. “Children wanted to climb on them. They had a tactile allure since they were rubber. They really invited an interactive response.” This response was not stifled, but rather encouraged, and though children were asked not to climb atop the sculptures, close viewing and even touching was allowed.

Each sculpture had informational text on its pedestal, which included details about the artist and project. The Paul Revere House and Vita Brevis also collaborated on a brochure that provided additional information; around 2000 copies were distributed during the exhibition. A benefit to displaying public art in a semi-private space was the opportunity to gain quantifiable data that are usually hard to ascertain from most public art projects. For the first time, Vita Brevis was able to measure audience attendance, and from June through mid October, 140,628 people saw Kozuru’s exhibition. Of course, this number does not accurately reflect how many people actually engaged in the piece, Steblecki points out this figure merely points to people paying through their admission window for access to the Paul Revere property. Also unusual

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80 Ibid.
81 Ibid.
82 Ibid
for Vita Brevis projects, a comment book kept on Paul Revere site provided substantive examples of audience response. Mostly favorable reviews, filled two comment books. Examples ranged from the general, “The sculptures are something else—very impressive!” to the more nuanced readings, “To see the old in a new way is a wonderful way to connect the past and present and future.”83 Though generally enthusiastic responses to the exhibition, there were comments from some who felt the sculptures were unsuitable and clashed with the historic nature of the site, with words like “weird,” and “inappropriate.”84

These four pieces collectively defined a new role for contemporary art for the ICA, as method of remembering social history. The works themselves were reflections of the culture in which they are exhibited, and situated museum art in the field of social studies. Certainly a precedent had been set by individual pieces or shows as concerted efforts to re-imagine episodes of facets of particular society’s history, but the relationship between a museum and public art program provided the perfect venue for a more meaningful and coordinated attempt at writing social history. Attie, in using the forgotten past of ICA’s own building, uncovered a forgotten, or unspoken, story of disenfranchised citizens, and asked his viewers to reevaluate their present day prejudices. Both Carlson and Band used the residents of Boston as material for their works, forging an intimate connection between the ICA and its neighbors. Kozuru co-opted a national historic figure to tell her own family’s history as Japanese immigrants. One of the key reasons these pieces effectively reached new audiences because they were unashamedly subjective, and focused on the personal story perhaps at the expense of a grander world view. However, it is that subjectivity that allows in the personal stories of Carlson’s doctors or Attie’s inmates, and provided a microcosmic look into the lives of individual citizens. When history is conceived in

84 Ibid
biographical terms or in sociological terms you can arrive at a uniquely personal view of the past.
Conclusion

The ICA began in 1936 as a placeless institution, nomadic until it found its current home on the Boston’s waterfront. Opened to the public in December 2006, the building—the first new art museum built in Boston in nearly 100 years—is a 65,000-square-foot bunker-like form that stands dramatically at the water’s edge. Designed by architects Diller Scofidio + Renfro, the spectacular building was intended to draw the large volume of visitors it could never accommodate in its previous space on Boylston Street. Curiously, the ICA retired the program name “Vita Brevis” upon the building’s opening. However, Collette Crandall, Communications Manager at the ICA, maintained that public art remained a mission at the ICA.\(^8\) Despite Crandall’s assertions otherwise, the opening of the new building corresponded with Vita Brevis’ unofficial last show, “Art on the Harbor Islands” in the summer of 2007.

For the first time, artists participating in “Art on the Harbor Islands” were asked to create a sister piece for the museum proper. For Teri Rueb, who believes her work to be “much more native to Vita Brevis’s set of priorities than the museum,” this request revealed the fundamental divergence between the public art program and the museum’s agenda. She says, “There was this weird sense through negations from the piece being installed in that gallery, that, while the museum asked us to be represented there, they didn’t really want homeless people into the gallery. They didn’t want the gesture of messiness in the cleanliness of the new gallery.”\(^8\) Rueb had difficulty getting approval for her space inside the museum. Even though the piece had been explicitly commissioned for inside the museum, several museum staff wanted the piece to be out on the deck and not in the upstairs galleries. Rueb credits Meehan’s deft negotiations for the piece’s eventual location in the Founder’s Gallery—a passageway not originally intended for

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\(^8\) Collette Crandall, email to the author, February 1, 2010.
\(^8\) Terri Rueb, phone interview with the author, February 7, 2010.
exhibition space that spans width of the north end of the exhibition space, featuring a floor-to-ceiling glass wall, giving a full panorama of the water and urban skyline. Yet, decoupled from the original site, many of the original projects’ manifestations in the gallery, including Rueb’s, were merely appendages or artifacts of site-specific work, rather than fully realized, independent pieces.

The opening of the new building corresponded with a change in the institution’s focus, one which effectively pushed out the public agenda. The waterfront space’s realization was at the expense of a long-lasting public art program, an unfortunate example of the white cube model superceding other missions. According to Mary Jane Jacob, “forms of cultural expression outside museum-sanctioned spaces are demeaned or devalued.”

Evidence of this can be found in the unceremonious retirement of Vita Brevis. Despite the ICA’s statement that public art remained a mission, Meehan is no longer with the ICA and her position as chief curator of Vita Brevis remains unfilled. In addition, since “Art of on the Harbor Islands” in 2007, the ICA has not developed a public art project. The nearest it has come was with a proposed re-teaming with Krzysztof Wodiczko to celebrate of the ten-year anniversary of Vita Brevis. Instead of Wodiczko’s customary public pieces, the ICA commissioned a video projection for inside the galleries. Deputy Director of External Relations, Paul Bessire said: “We were originally planning to do [Wodiczko’s project] outside but we decided to do it inside because it could be up longer.”

Meehan echoes Bessire’s statement: “One of the benefits of the new ICA is the expanded facility on the waterfront which allows greater flexibility of presentation, and which

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may, on occasion, depending on the exhibition, have an outdoor component.” She cites as evidence of the museum’s continued commitment to public art the outdoor component to the exhibition *Shepard Fairey: Supply and Demand* in 2009. Fairey’s murals, though exhibited in public locations around Boston, could hardly be classified as public art like that of Vita Brevis’s programs. The murals lacked the strong conceptual connections to their sites common to all Vita Brevis works, and could have easily been transferred to another city. Moving pieces inside the gallery, like Wodiczko’s work, strips the project of any relevancy to site and robs the piece of its “publicness,” the two founding principles of Vita Brevis. The public announcement made by Crandall, and confirmed by Meehan, reveals an unspoken intention to dissolve the original Vita Brevis, which, for a time, represented the best kind of temporary public art program, one founded on the principle of reaching out into the community and engaging with contemporary issues.

Perhaps the lack of demonstrable effects caused cutbacks in financing for Vita Brevis. In the museum structure, attendance figures speak directly to an exhibition’s success or failure, and Meehan admittedly struggled with how to measure the impact of these outlying projects on audiences. In order for such a public art program to succeed it needs the same dedicated support afforded to other curatorial departments, without the same expectations of quantifiable results, and unfortunately for Vita Brevis, this proved insupportable. However, in this unique partnership, the program provides a model of institutional practice that would allow countless other museums to engage more meaningfully with the historical and contemporary cultures of their own cities. The program demonstrated a novel approach to reaching new audiences, not with educational models or outreach programs, but with art. While the ICA positioning itself as

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89 Carole Anne Meehan, phone interview with the author, August, 28, 2009.
social hub for its constituents emphasizing its role as a cultural center is nothing unique, its approach to public art was novel.

Public art by virtue of its location outside the private sphere is an inherently more populist forum than a museum setting; it can reach a greater variety and number of people and should, therefore, be incorporated regularly into museum practice. The example of Vita Brevis adduces that public art programs can exist under the aegis of a museum. Museums, particularly those in urban landscapes, can use public art to re-energize their constituency by directly responding to local landscape, history, and community, something that is all but impossible to do in the removed sanctity of the museum galleries. Physical accessibility can be a considerable asset of a public art initiative, but perhaps more important is conceptual access: that is, undertaking issues that pertain to community life—as with Remedy—or directly involving audiences—as with Chalk. This is the hallmark of a program like Vita Brevis. As well, invoking the specifics of locality helps further define the identity of the museum. Each city is distinctive, and a public art program can help a museum to express such uniqueness, while keeping the galleries’ universal appeal to non-local visitors. The ICA through the mission of Vita Brevis was Boston-centric; its galleries, however, maintained the international appeal of a modern-day contemporary art museum.

While Vita Brevis provides a model of institutional practice, its ultimate failure presents important caveats. The projects highlighted herein demonstrate the artists most closely aligned with the founding principles of the program. The ICA, although strongly championing the work of Vita Brevis, could have made the public art agenda a more valuable part of the institution. Its unique position as a formerly autonomous program that came under the wing of a museum afforded Vita Brevis a great deal of latitude within the ICA. Its scheduling was not contingent on
gallery exhibitions, and Meehan worked primarily independent of the other museum’s curators. Yet, such autonomy can be a liability as programs with the least ties to the museum are at greater risk to be cut. For Vita Brevis, Meehan was sole curator. Since her departure from ICA, there is no one of the curatorial team that can even field questions about the now defunct Vita Brevis. Had the program been integrated more thoroughly into museum programming, perhaps it might not have been as dispensable.

Exhibiting the works in a public space, and outside the contextual framework of the museum, is an essential aspect of the works. Vita Brevis’s participants are members of the community, and without them the works themselves would not materialize. In making residents of Boston key players in the creation of the artwork, their personal expressions were heroicized—elevated to the level of “art”—in a highly visible public space. In response to a question about the nature of public art, artist Siah Armajani aptly states, “It is not about the myth of the artist, but it is about civicness. It is not to make people feel diminished and insignificant, but to glorify them.” The works of Vita Brevis do just that. Responding to vastly different issues concerning the Boston community, the pieces collectively illustrate the most meaningful interaction between a museum and its public. Such temporary projects escaped both the physical context of the museum and the super-social aesthetic experience that that context implies. The viewer encountered these pieces in public social space, free of the expectation accorded a museum visit, and therefore was allowed to engage with the work as thoroughly or as casually as any other daily encounter. No other museum program can hope to reach the viewer in this manner.

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90 Quoted in *Plop: Recent Projects of the Public Art Fund*, 19.
Image List

*All images courtesy of The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3
Jim Hodges, *Here We Are*, 1998
Figure 4
Mildred Howard, S.S., 1998

Figure 5

Figure 6
Figure 7

Figure 8
Ellen Driscoll, *Meanderlink*, 2000

Figure 9
Figure 10
Allora & Calzadilla, *Chalk*, 2004

Figure 11
Terri Rueb, *Core Sample*, 2007

Figure 12
Shimon Attie, *An Unusually Bad Lot*, 1999
Figure 13
Ellen Band, *Portal of Prayer*, 2004

Figure 14
Niho Kozuru, *Longfellow Balustrade Column*, 2004

Figure 15
Niho Kozuru, *Urn*, 2004
Figure 16
Niho Kozuru, Revere House Window, 2004

Figure 17
Niho Kozuru, *Double Finial*, 2004
Appendix A

Site map of Vita Brevis locations:

Close up of downtown Boston:

*Maps from Google.com
Appendix B

Chronology

1998


With:
  Jim Hodges: *Here We Are* (Old North Church)
  Mildred Howard: *S.S.* (Old South Meeting House)
  Barbara Steinman: *Colonnade* (The Boston Common)
  Krzysztof Wodiczko: *The Bunker Hill Monument Projection* (Bunker Hill Monument)

1999

Shimon Attie: *An Unusually Bad Lot*, The 2nd Annual ICA / Vita Brevis Project, December 1999, (955 Boylston Street, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston)

2000

“Art on the Emerald Necklace,” The 3rd Annual ICA / Vita Brevis Project, Summer 2000

With:
  James Boorstein: *Emanations* (Ward’s Pond)
  Ann Carlson: *Any Day Now* (Franklin Park)
  Ellen Driscoll: *Meanderlink* (various locations)
  Barnaby Evans: *Moving Water* (Muddy River)
  Sheila Kelly and Frano Violich: *Common Pleasures: Parkway* (Monsignor William Casey Overpass)
  Cornelia Parker: *At the Bottom of This Lake* (Leverett Pond)
  Nari Ward: *Beautiful Necessity: Hugging Post* (Franklin Park)

2001

Olafur Eliasson: *The young land*, The 4th Annual ICA / Vita Brevis Project, Summer 2001 (Boston Harbor)

Michael Dowling and Laura Baring Gould: *Conspire*, Boston National Park / Vita Brevis collaboration, June - October 2001 (The Paul Revere House)
2002

2003
Ann Carlson and Mary Ellen Strom: Remedy, The 5th Annual ICA / Vita Brevis Project, May 2003 (various locations)

2004

Allora and Calzadilla: Chalk, The 7th Annual ICA / Vita Brevis Project, July 2004, (Boston Common)

Niho Kozuru: Returning the Past, Boston National Park / Vita Brevis collaboration, June-October, 2004 (Paul Revere House)

2005
Jerry Beck: The Secret Ark of Icon Park, Boston National Park / Vita Brevis collaboration, July-October 2005 (Charlestown Navy Yard)

Julian Opie: Julian Walking and Suzanne Walking, 8th Annual ICA / Vita Brevis Project, October 2005 – October 2006 (Northern Avenue Bridge)

2006
Julian Opie: Julian Walking and Suzanne Walking, 8th Annual ICA / Vita Brevis Project, October 2005 – October 2006 (Northern Avenue Bridge)

2007

With:
Office dA: Voromuro (Georges Island)
Ernesto Pujol: The Water Cycle (Spectacle Island, Georges Island, Lovells Island, Little Brewster Island)
Teri Rueb: Core Sample (Spectacle Island)
Anna Schuleit: Waterside, (Lovells Island)
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Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston. “The Institute of Contemporary Art’s First Year in Waterfront building brings Record Attendance.” [http://www.icaboston.org/about/pressreleases/1st-Anniv/](http://www.icaboston.org/about/pressreleases/1st-Anniv/).


