

Art Matters

Psychogeography + Hudson River Valley + the High Line Minetta Brook + Loss = An Update

Barbara Swift

With Diane's death, the Minetta Brook era is ending, and, with it, a powerful vehicle for uncompromising work and discussion.



Diane Shamash
photo: Sandra Percival

In December 2005 the nonprofit organization Minetta Brook was involved in numerous projects: completing the extensive *Watershed: Hudson Valley Art Project*; realizing Robert Smithson's *Floating Island*—a planted barge circumnavigating Manhattan Island; advancing the High Line artist collaboration with Ann Hamilton and Alice Waters; and beginning a new project in Texas.

By December 2006, Minetta Brook director Diane Shamash had died at 51, and Minetta Brook looked likely to close shop. The High Line artist collaboration was fading without Diane as an advocate. Separately, DIA: Chelsea had pulled out from a commitment to develop a contemporary exhibition space at the south end of the High Line, and the Whitney was looking at the Chelsea neighborhood with its architect Renzo Piano. This is sad and chilling: the numerous dissolutions and collapses that follow a death.

This article is about loss: of an individual and an organization with a mission of strengthening the relationship between artists and communities through projects, exhibits and events that refused to condescend to the public. It is about artwork profoundly embedded in place—the ecological, historical and social organism of place—and, to a lesser degree, embedded in the commercial and public art worlds.

Diane Shamash, director of Public Art at the Seattle Arts Commission from 1987 to 1993, started Minetta Brook in 1995 and

“was never scared to create ‘public art,’ which in practice was seen and appreciated by a very small audience. For Diane, public art was not a popularity contest. If she refused to submit to the tyranny of the popular, Diane also refused to be told what art was and was not. Food could be art, as could barbecue grills or park benches.” This Felixsalmon blog quote encapsulates Diane’s core approach that was of such great value. It is important in this time of a polarized art world, with studio-based art seemingly dominated by a commercialized “Entertainment Tonight” art scene of spectacular consumption, and public art viewed by some as having little standing within critical discourse or any reciprocal relationship with the contemporary art world.

Minetta Brook’s commitment to artists and place resulted in *riverrun* in the fall of 2002, two weeks of nightly screenings of works by Richard Serra, John Lennon, Yoko Ono, Peter Hutton, and Colleen Mulrenan projected on the façade of the Holland Tunnel Ventilation Building for an audience of 2.5 million. It resulted in the *Watershed Project*: ten artists working within the environmental, historical, and cultural context of the Hudson River Valley Region. Christian Phillip Mueller, George Trakas, Constance De Jong and others built on the legacy of the region with works that referenced the working river, the colored

lenses of Claude Lorrain, and the taste of the region's soils in vegetables and produce. The *Watershed Project* was first and foremost artists and their ideas about what constitutes place. Supporting these artists and their pursuits was an expansive network of individuals, organizations, governments and universities, easing the obstacles that can stop challenging work. Culinary events marked project milestones with the *Watershed Tastemakers Series*, binding people to the project by celebrating the relationship of food and place.

Diane shaped a venue to support artists' exploring the public landscape with great rigor—bridging the gap between contemporary artists and the public. This commitment began a process of building a critical discourse around a body of psychogeographic work in the public realm, engaging viewers in an organic and pointed relationship to place. This body of work, with roots in Situationist theory, was pressing discourse to a level that is rarely achieved in the commercial or public sectors. Bridges in a polarized circumstance are usually built by the force and commitment of an individual, and are rarely supported financially as needed to sustain the vision. Witness the short life of Horsehead in Seattle. With Diane's death, the Minetta Brook era is ending, and with it a powerful vehicle for uncompromising work and discussion.

Why should we on the West Coast care? We should care because of what Minetta Brook accomplished in its short lifetime and the example it leaves us. We have lost an individual and an organization that were creating a well-regarded and compelling body of work within the public realm. The art world has lost a champion for complex and rich work profoundly embedded in the patterns, both solid and ephemeral, of place. If Diane had lived and Minetta Brook flourished, the ripple

effect of this disciplined, invigorated engagement could have been even more significant. Minetta Brook and its short lifespan highlight the difficulty of securing sustained support for conceptual, demanding and often ephemeral work in the public realm—work designed to engender conversation. In the Northwest, 4Culture is pressing into this arena through its site-specific program. With organizations like Western Bridge, Suyama Space and Henry Art Gallery presenting provocative work within their walls, what would happen if they came together in alliance to take work outside, using the public realm to champion the art of the idea, creating opportunities for artists to create challenging work? Loss illuminates, and so Diane Shamash and Minetta Brook stand as an example of what can be done—with enough determination, dedication and energy—to transform our experience of place with a rigorous engagement of art and the public realm.

Barbara Swift, of Swift & Company, wishing she could have had dinner with Diane at 80.