Wadsworth Atheneum
HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT

Peggy Diggs / MATRIX 124
May 22 - September 18, 1994

Peggy Diggs With Students Pittsfield High School: Bulk Mail Project, 1993
Photo: John LeClaire

MATRIX is supported by funds from Actna Life & Casualty, the LEF Foundation, the Norton Family Foundation, the Women's Committee of the Wadsworth Atheneum, The Hartford Courant, Lewtan Industries Corporation, and the New England Foundation for the Arts with additional support from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Connecticut Commission on the Arts.
Peggy Diggs: From Private to Public

MATRIX 124

At one time public art meant an equestrian statue, an ornamental fountain, or a piece of tangled metal in a plaza. Today it is as likely to mean a community mural, a T-shirt with an artist-designed logo, or a landfill park constructed by a multidisciplinary group.

From the announcement card for Public Interventions, The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, April 27 - July 17, 1994.

Slipping into an arena between advertising, journalism, anthropology, teaching, and artmaking, my aim is both to amplify voices from segments of the population that, for a variety of reasons, have been stifled and to find ways to air their concerns...My goal is to participate in a democratic process, using public space to stage public dialogue in a way that aims to enable community members to rethink an issue in common.

Peggy Diggs, from a statement about The Hartford Grandmothers Project, September, 1993.

We need to find ways not to educate audiences for art, but to truthfully address the relations of power that have been governing cultural activity, and build structures that share that power inherent in making culture with as many people as possible. How can we change the disposition of exclusiveness that lies at the heart of cultural life in the United States...?

Lynn Sowder, co-director, Y-Core, 1993.

Peggy Diggs: From Private to Public traces Diggs’ evolution from an artist working alone in her studio to an artist who has redirected her efforts to the public sector. Diggs has been an active participant in a new kind of public art, one in which an artist collaborates with groups of citizens at a grass roots level. "I take the issue of public space seriously. I feel we need to operate differently in public than in private," says Diggs. "The artist who engages public space has an essential responsibility to use the occasion to engage issues of public concern not private expression." The art that results from these collaborations frequently engages pressing social issues.

Thanks to Peggy Diggs and other artists, our ideas about what art can be are expanding once again. Redefining the field has occurred, of course, repeatedly during this century. Now, in the 1990s, we are being offered an art that takes place almost
exclusively outside of the museum context (though we can document it in a museum exhibition).

Furthermore, instead of honoring the venerable notion of art as the exalted product of an individual, exceptional (and, until recently, usually white male) genius, Diggs and some of her colleagues are suggesting that meaningful artistic expressions can also be fashioned collaboratively by average citizens. "The prestige of individualism is so high in our culture," says critic Suzi Gablik, "it has completely structured artistic identity. My sense is that we have finally come up against the limits of that particular paradigm and that there is a real yearning now for a sense of community and intimacy that has been lost in modern culture. What is involved here is a shift in our understanding of the self as relational and interactive, rather than as an identity in isolation." Not only are some artists making this shift, but institutions all over the country — such as the Wadsworth Atheneum and many others — are also tentatively making a modest shift in their orientation. But it is some of our artists who are the trail blazers, out there ahead on an unfamiliar path.

This new public art often catches citizens' attention as they go about the business of their daily lives. In Diggs' work, the encounter is likely to take place, for instance, in a local retail market, at a neighborhood tavern or fast-food stop, on a familiar billboard site, in your mail box or in your daily newspaper (See The Hartford Courant on June 16, 1994, which will include the fruition of Diggs' The Hartford Grandmothers Project: An Exchange with City Teens).

Diggs' goal is to nestle art directly into the fabric of our routines rather than to present it in the rarified atmosphere of a museum or art gallery. Indeed, it is fundamental to Diggs' public art that any museum context exhibits documentation of her projects rather than the works themselves. Diggs' work resists traditional art museum contextualization, and this resistance illustrates the gap between traditional notions of art making and her innovative practice. Diggs is attempting to address a broader public, one that begins to transcend, in some small way, the economic, racial, ethnic, and class lines that divide us from each other.

Not only does Diggs suggest expanding the audience for art, but also she attempts to broaden our customary understanding of who can legitimately and seriously make art in a public context. She offers the inclusive, collaborative process of many as an alternative to the longstanding Western tradition of individual authorship. She offers us dialogue instead of monologue. Though she herself would not presume to claim such high moral ground, her efforts (and those of some of her colleagues) are projects that demonstrate the essential spirit of democracy — an art of the people, by the people, and for the people.
NINGUNA MUJER

• Ser golpeada
• Ser maltratada con insultos
• Ser discriminada salarial y laboralmente
• Ser convertida en objeto de comercialización sexual
• Ser obligada a tener relaciones sexuales

DEBE PERMITIR:

Caracas Subway Project, 1992
Photo: Marty Heitner
"This is not the life we want to live nor the life we had in mind for you."

Diggs' topics are determined, in large part, by those with whom she collaborates. Yet, Diggs is clear that she is "not interested in simply voicing rage and venom on the part of the group (not that there aren't plenty of reasons to be enraged at this point in time, in this society). Other formats in the culture are already doing that."4

Such public art gives greater visibility to those legitimate concerns, which our society is inclined to keep at a comfortable distance. These projects, sometimes called "public interventions," take great care and time to develop, and the final results are frequently short-lived and modest in scale, yet memorable. This kind of public art literally moves the artist out of the studio and into the community. Diggs has made dozens of visits to Hartford developing The Hartford Grandmothers Project.

Peggy Diggs: From Private to Public includes four works of art made by Diggs alone in the conventional privacy of her studio. Some American Flags (1989), which hangs in Avery Court, addresses a continuing controversy that flares up from time to time about what liberties an artist might take in altering an image of "stars and stripes." With these four flags -- one graphically "correct" (according to strict federal guidelines) and three subtly altered -- Diggs asks us to consider, just where, in a democracy, do we draw the line on freedom of expression?

Three other individually-made works -- Memorial (1991), A Boy-Collector's Quilt (1991), and Objects of Abuse (1991) -- deal forcefully with issues of child abuse and domestic violence. Each of these confronts us with subjects that are chillingly uncomfortable, even horrifying. They bring us face-to-face with issues most, including those who have survived such assaults, would prefer to avoid. It was Diggs' inclination to tackle these difficult social concerns that led her to move her work out into the public sector and to invite collaboration with her informants, whom she has called her "expert witnesses."5

One of Diggs' most notable efforts is The Domestic Violence Milk Carton Project (1992). Teaching at a local Massachusetts community college in the 1980s, she was surprised at how many female students spoke of the abuse they and their mothers experienced at the hands of boyfriends and husbands. Angela Browne's When Battered Women Kill (Free Press, 1987) was a catalyst for Diggs. She subsequently interviewed people who work in shelters, rape crisis centers, and police departments as well as two abused women in the Rhode Island state prison, one of whom had killed her husband in retaliation for domestic violence. All those interviewed raised concerns about the severe isolation and lack of information among battered women and children.

One of the incarcerated women stated that her activities were so limited by her jealous and suspicious husband, she had lost her
"This life is not our choice. If it's like this, then it's like this."

job, lost her friends, and the only place she was allowed to go was the grocery store. Sadly, after it was too late, she learned that there was a women's shelter two blocks from her house. The Milk Carton Project is a direct result of her story. All participants agreed it was important to find a way to reach those women and children who do not go to galleries or museums.

The text on the milk carton, "When You Argue At Home, Does It Always Get Out of Hand?", addressed both the victim and the perpetrator, and offered the National Domestic Violence Hotline 800 number. (This number has since been discontinued, due to lack of funds. A useful number in the Hartford area is Interval House, 527-0550.) Tuscan Dairy Farms of New Jersey distributed 1.5 million of these in the New York Metropolitan area during a two-week period in the winter of 1992.

In 1993, Diggs received a Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest International Artists Fellowship to do a public art project in Caracas, Venezuela. There she met with a large consortium of women's groups already seeking greater influence on public policy. Together they explored ways in which some of their concerns might be given greater visibility. Following weeks of discussion and a sequence of design proposals by Diggs based on these discussions, the final result was a poster that spoke out against both physical and verbal abuse of women: "No women should allow herself to be hit, to be verbally abused, to be exploited in the workplace, to be used for sexual commercialization, to be forced to have sexual intercourse against her will." Given the conservative mores that dominate South American society, the appearance of these bold posters throughout the public subway system marked a sharp departure from silence on the subject. In addition to her work in Venezuela, the Fellowship allowed her to develop projects at three high schools in her home region: Drury High School: Drunk Driving Project; Hoosac Valley High School: Billboard Project; and Pittsfield High School: Bulk Mail Project, all documented in this exhibition.

In conjunction with this MATRIX exhibition, Diggs has developed a local public art project called The Hartford Grandmothers Project: An Exchange With City Teens. She has been making frequent visits to Hartford, from her home in Williamstown, Massachusetts, since September, 1993. On Thursday, June 16, 1994, The Hartford Courant will distribute 22,000 2-part inserts to subscribers in Hartford proper. (These inserts will also be available in the exhibition.) This publication and scratch-off game card, designed by Diggs and her many collaborators, is a unique opportunity to share the ideas of many of Hartford's often-ignored senior women and includes a response to their concerns by city teens. The audiotapes in the exhibition, the
"What I'd like to say to the guys out on the streets committing crimes now is this:  What do you see for yourself in the future?"

quotations in red letters all around the space, and Diggs' handwritten transcriptions of the tapes hanging in the yellow room also bring the voices of Hartford's senior women into the center of the Wadsworth Atheneum for museum visitors to hear.

Why has this kind of public art emerged over the past decade or so? Perhaps it is true that artists are the antennae of their time. Ours is a time of apparent media saturation when, ironically, information overload goes hand-in-hand with the growing isolation of minority communities, whether they be the elderly or "troubled" teens. Faced with diminishing economic opportunities and increasing violence, widespread hopelessness, and even plague, we need the best efforts of all our citizens — artists included — to face these daunting challenges and to nurture the promises of democracy.

Andrea Miller-Keller
Emily Hall Tremaine Curator
of Contemporary Art

2 Peggy Diggs, from a statement about The Hartford Grandmothers Project September, 1993, unpaginated.
4 Diggs, from a statement about The Hartford Grandmothers Project September, 1993, unpaginated.

PLEASE NOTE:
Andrea Miller-Keller, Emily Hall Tremaine Curator of Contemporary Art will give a gallery talk on the exhibition Tuesday, May 25, 1994 at noon.

Peggy Diggs will give an informal MATRIX Lecture, New Directions in Public Art, on Sunday afternoon, September 18, 1994 at 2 p.m. in The Hartford Courant Room. A reception in her honor will follow the talk. This event is free with museum admission.

For special tours of this exhibition please call Linda Friedlaender, Associate Curator of Education at 278-2670, ext. 321 for further information.
"I don't think about the future."

The Hartford Grandmothers Project: An Exchange with City Teens

(Excerpt of text by Peggy Diggs. To be distributed in The Hartford Courant on June 16, 1994. Also available in the MATRIX space after that date.)

This is a public art project by Peggy Diggs, sponsored and supported by the MATRIX program at the Wadsworth Atheneum.* It begins with discussions with older women in Hartford — grandmothers and great-grandmothers — after last summer's gang wars. We talked about how they stay safe, what they do for security. Many of them like aging. But many say they feel like hostages in their homes: threatened, scared, often afraid to go out. Their anger flares up at times at young people whom they hold responsible for the atmosphere of danger. They all say that after all their years of working, they deserve some safety and peace as they begin to feel more frail. But right now they feel anything but peaceful.

Because their remarks repeatedly focus on young people, it seemed important to speak directly with city teens about what the women are feeling. I have been talking with groups at Bulkeley High School, Charter Oak Terrace YMCA, The Boys Club near Weaver High School, and groups at Y-USS at Immaculate Conception Church on Park Street. They had responses to many of the women’s comments — some surprising, some sad — all of which together make up this project.

In an effort to get these comments back out to the community, I thought about different formats and means of distribution that made sense with the subject matter. I thought about votive cards and lottery tickets (which are both about hoping for better things), of baseball cards (because of their size and collectability). I came up with this: a sheet of perforated cards with the senior women’s comments on one side and the teens’ responses on the other. There's a scratch-off surface over the teens’ comments, suggested by the women frequently saying they felt teens are hard to reach and difficult to understand. This becomes a kind of game; you have to work to "hear" the kids. It's often risky to hear another person’s point of view: you don't know what you'll get, and then, what you might have to do about it.

These are real issues: one generation feels it’s worked hard and deserves more, the other feels it inherited a situation for which it’s often being blamed. Both feel the future is going to be rough. Right now is rough enough.
"I always thank God I'm old, I haven't got that much longer to live. I won't have to worry about what goes on. There doesn't seem to be any future."


"I envy her; she got to be 80 years old."

Works in MATRIX:

All works are lent courtesy of the artist, Williamstown, MA.

Individual Works:

Some American Flags, 1989, flag bunting, four flags, c. 7' x 4' each (in Avery court).
Memorial, 1991, mixed media (baby dress, wire, frame, oil gold leaf), 35 1/2" x 29" x 3".
A Boy-Collector's Quilt, 1991, mixed media (underpants, flannel, satin, ink), plastic toy figures, 76" x 60".
Objects of Abuse, 1991, mixed media (household objects, painted steel grid, rubber bungee cords), 48" x 96" x 5".

Collaborative Public Works:

Domestic Violence Billboard (Pittsfield, Adams, Lee, MA), 1991, billboard, 10' x 7'; documentary color photograph, 16" x 20".
Domestic Violence Milk Carton Project, 1992, 1/2 gallon milk carton facsimiles and actual cartons produced by Tuscan Dairy; documentary color photograph of milk cartons on refrigerator shelf, 11" x 14".
Caracas Subway Project, 1992, posters, ink on paper, 29" x 41"; two documentary color photographs, 16" x 20" each.
Drury High School: Drunk Driving Project, 1993, bar coasters, table tents, ink on paper; documentary color photograph, 11" x 14".
Hooysac Valley High School: Billboard Project, 1993, black and white photograph of student photo session, 16"x 20"; documentary color photograph of billboard, c. 24" x 30".
Pittsfield High School: Bulk Mail Project, 1993, computer printout postcards (c. 200 connected cards) and c. 100 postcard and letter responses with envelopes.
Domestic Violence Bus Poster, Winnipeg, Canada, 1993, six proposals, works on paper, xerox, colored pencil, c. 4" x 13" (3), c. 5" x 14" (2), 5" x 18" (1); documentary color photograph, c. 24"x 30".
The Hartford Grandmothers Project: An Exchange with City Teens, 1994, mixed media room 8' x 10' x 9'10" (nine wall texts, ink on paper, 7' x 3' each), photo documentation, audio component, preliminary proposals and publications from The Hartford Courant, June 16, 1994.
"Because we’re old, we don’t have the right to speak up. They all forget that they’re going to get old too."

**Selected Public Projects:**

*Billboards on Domestic Violence* (series of 4), Berkshire County, MA '86, funded by Massachusetts Arts Lottery; *Domestic Violence Billboard Project* (series of 3), Berkshire County, MA '91, funded by New England Foundation for the Arts; *Domestic Violence Milk Carton Project* '92, promotion funded by Creative Time Inc., NYC; *Domestic Violence Metro Poster Project*, Caracas, Venezuela '92, funded by Lila Wallace-Reader’s Digest International Artists Program; *High School Public Art Projects*, Berkshire County, MA '93: *Drury High School: Drunk Driving Project*, *Hoosac Valley High School: Billboard Project*, *Pittsfield High School: Bulk Mail Project*, all funded by Lila Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund and locally sponsored by Williams College Museum of Art; *The Hartford Grandmothers Project: An Exchange with City Teens*, Hartford, CT '94, sponsored by the MATRIX program of the Wadsworth Atheneum, with support from Aetna Life & Casualty, the LEF Foundation, the Norton Family Foundation, the Women’s Committee of the Wadsworth Atheneum, The Hartford Courant, Lewtan Industries Corporation, and the New England Foundation for the Arts with additional support from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Connecticut Commission on the Arts.

**Selected One-Person Exhibitions:**

Hera Gallery, Wakefield, RI '80, *The Domestic Violence Work* '92; University Gallery at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA '80; University of Rhode Island, Kingston, RI *Act Like A Queen* '80; List Gallery, Brown University, Providence, RI *Situation* '80; Rhode Island School of Design Outdoor Courtyard, Providence, RI *Hmmm/Past II* '81; Just Above Midtown/Downtown Gallery, NYC '82; Franklin Furnace Archive, NYC *Oh No* '82, *Us/Them: Promises* '90; Vassar College Art Gallery, Poughkeepsie, NY *Forces* '83; Chicago Books, NYC *Facts Speaking for Themselves* (window installation) '84; Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, ME *Routine Epilogue* '84; Indiana University Gallery, Bloomington, IN *Position One* '85; Alternative Museum, NYC *Domestic Violence Project* '92.
“Old folks have a self-esteem problem because kids get all the attention.”

*Domestic Violence Milk Carton Project, 1992
Photo: Ralph Lieberman*
"We seniors don’t have any effect on anything, on any situations, so there’s no point in anticipating problems before they get out of hand."

**Selected Group Exhibitions:**

55 Mercer Gallery, NYC '80; Alternative Museum, NYC *Ikon/Logos* '81; Sculpture Center, NYC '82; Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, NY *Bridges* (Brooklyn Bridge Centennial Celebration outdoor installation) '83; Just Above Midtown/Downtown Gallery, NYC *A Love Story* '83; Hampden Gallery, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA '84; The Berkshire Museum, Pittsfield, MA *Works on Paper* '88; Atelier u. Galerie Kolektiv, Wuppertal, Germany '88, '89 (in collaboration with The Office for Common Work of Culture in Nordrhein-Westfalen: Wuppertal, Cologne and Gelsenkirchen); The Drawing Center, NYC *Selections 46* '89; List Visual Arts Center, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA *Trouble in Paradise* '89 (also travelled to The Art Gallery of the University of Maryland, College Park, MD '90); DeCordova Museum, Lincoln, MA *Land, Sea and Sky: Maps in Contemporary Art* '91, *Goodbye to Apple Pie: Contemporary Artists View the Family in Crisis* '92; N.A.M.E. Gallery, Chicago, IL *Through the Kitchen Door* '91; Henry Street Settlement, NYC *The Stories Exhibit: Art Beyond Words* '92; Howard Yezerski Gallery, Boston, MA *House on Fire* '92; Center Galleries, Center for Creative Studies — College of Art and Design, Detroit, MI *The Home Show: Objects For and About The Home* '92; The Art Museum at Florida International University, Miami, FL *American Art Today: Clothing as Metaphor* '93; Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC *The Subject of Rape* '93; Interart Gallery, NYC *The Rag Trade* '93; The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA *Public Interventions* '94.
"We have much less effect on anything. We got no political power. At least they can vote."

Selected Bibliography about Peggy Diggs:


"Artist's project battles unspoken fears," (AP Wire) Bennington Banner November 2, 1991, p. 3.


Gable, Donna. "Museums put their social responsibility on display," USA Today March 25, 1992, p. 10D.


