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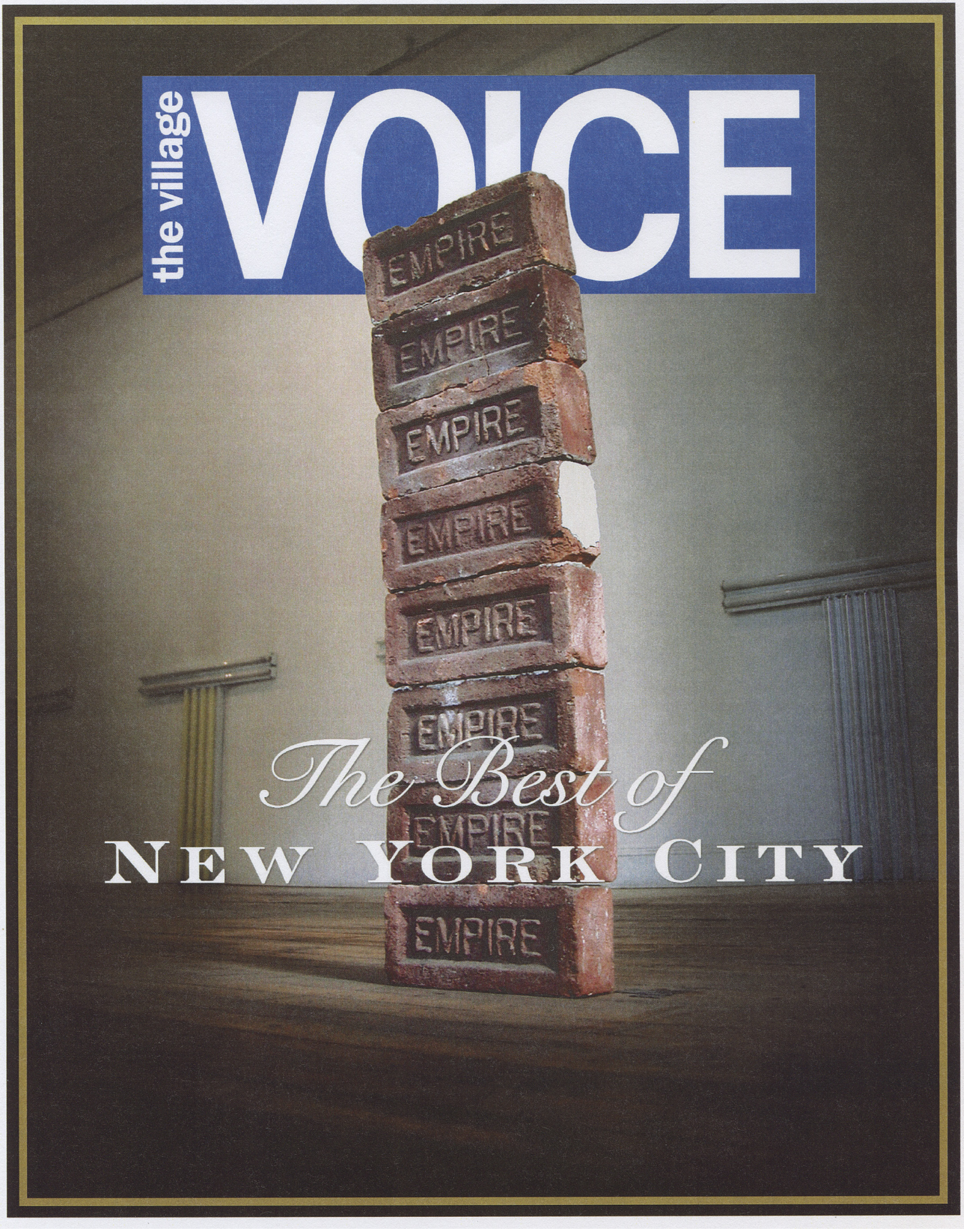


SUBJECT — Best Lost-Public-Art Walking Tour
LOCATION — Manhattan, Queens
REPORTED BY — R.C. Baker

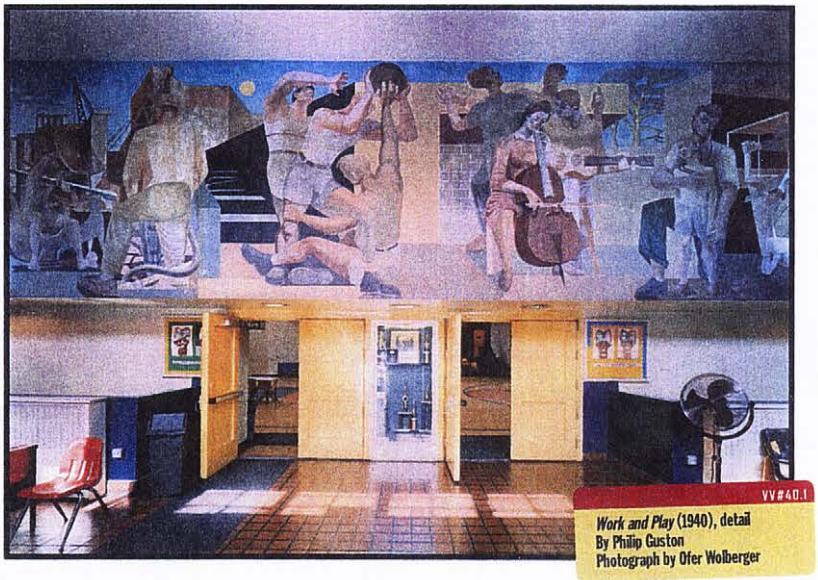
Before the Empire Strikes Back

Is "public art" oxymoronic? Can the work of fierce individualists be embraced by the masses? Gotham yields no easy answers.

Staffers call the massive mural over **30 ROCKEFELLER PLAZA**'s reception desk the "Wailing Wall," because its bland allegorical figures and enervated cityscape veil a clash of ideologies. In the depths of the Great Depression, John D. Rockefeller Jr. had a newly minted skyscraper to rent out. Pushed past his loathing of modern art by an aesthetically adventurous wife, the über-capitalist commissioned Mexican muralist Diego Rivera—who wore his Communist politics draped about him like a matador's red cape—to paint an allegory: *Man at the Crossroads.* Slave to the bottom line, Junior rationalized that "[Rivera] seems to have become very popular just now and will probably be a good drawing card." Indeed, 100 tickets were sold each day to view the master's blossoming Technicolor illumination of humanity's advancement through science and proletarian labor.

Then the head of a "great dead man" materialized on the wall.

It's doubtful any preliminary studies portrayed Lenin's visage, but since the Rockefellers already owned Rivera's sketchbook from Russia—filled with scenes celebrating the Worker's Paradise—this tribute should not have been a shock. Ordered to efface the outrage, Rivera refused, proposing a portrait of Lincoln as counterbalance and fatefully adding that otherwise he "should prefer the physical destruction of the conception in its entirety." Rockefeller's agents took the artist at his word, paid off his contract, shrouded the nearly completed fresco from view, weathered a year of free-speech protests, and finally, one midnight, had workmen chop the painted plaster off the wall. A lesser muralist shortly plugged the void.



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Work and Play (1940), detail
By Philip Guston
Photograph by Ofer Wolberger

Rivera gave the Rockefellers their money's worth 70 years ago, but frightened by a bit of propaganda, they exchanged his masterpiece for the sepia pall that has hung over their lobby ever since.

After a pleasing stroll across the Queensboro Bridge, a livelier lobby can be found in the Queensbridge housing project's **JACOB RIIS COMMUNITY CENTER**, 10-25 41st Avenue. One July afternoon, a visitor encountered kids painting posters, a piano recital attended by local seniors, and workmen refinishing a sidewalk. Over the entrance to the gymnasium, a 40-foot mural foreshadows this vibrant community: it includes scenes of a child sketching, a cellist surrounded by dancers, and a workman jackhammering concrete. Philip Guston, who allied a deep social conscience to his fecund brush, completed this WPA project, *Work and Play*, in 1940. Under the minor ravages of the elements and a few blunders by a restorer—"some of the faces are sweet and syrupy; Philip's faces had Renaissance solemnity," says his longtime dealer David McKee—lie Guston's bedrock themes and forms. His trash can lids, work shoes, and angular, entwined limbs soon morphed into the lush matrices and intensely modulated hues of his majestic '50s abstractions before bursting forth, recognizable once more, in the monumental cartoon paintings of the '70s. Unfortunately, by 1965, *Work and Play* was forever lost to Guston—he agonized that it looked "Terrible!" after "some commercial artist" retouched it: "I want the whole thing obliterated." Original photos prove this an overreaction from an emotional creator. It's just dumb luck that bureaucratic inertia preserved this wonder wall, which reveals Guston's grounding in 15th-century frescoes while simultaneously unveiling the originality that will propel his legacy at least as far into the future.

Now march back to Manhattan, downtown, to community's antithesis. Surrounded by a dark-windowed megalith abutting a squat, black courthouse, **1 FEDERAL PLAZA** has all the charm of detention hall in the school basement. In 1979, the General Services Agency commissioned Richard Serra to erect one of his elegant, space-torquing metal slabs across the windswept cobblestones; two years later, he bisected the plaza with 120 feet of two-inch-thick, 12-foot-high, Cor-Ten steel. Immediately, many of the federal employees developed a Hobbesian hatred toward the rusty barrier they had to circumvent daily—it was nasty, brutish, and long, and they wanted it gone.

Others, however, found *Tilted Arc*'s pitched, concave side quiet and warmly enclosing; its flip side provided a seemingly infinite recessional that was profoundly American—utilitarian materials opening vistas that welded disparate forces together. Throughout years of court battles, Serra was adamant that offers of relocation meant death to his site-specific sculpture. But in 1989, the forces of aggrieved conservatism finally pulled the trigger. Like Rivera's mural, *Tilted Arc* was destroyed under cover of night, 72 tons of scrap hauled to a government motor pool in Brooklyn. It had been given barely eight years—an eyeblink for radical art—to gain wider public appreciation. Today you'll find curlicue formations of lime-green benches set in purple concrete. We all paid for, and got, a penetrating work of art; many tax dollars later, we're left with an abandoned Barney set.

So lastly, trudge up to **101 SPRING STREET**, the cast-iron home of the Judd Foundation, partially obscured under weary scaffolding. In one corner of this minimalist shrine, which is practically lost amid Soho's frenzied mercantile bustle, stands a slight but monumentally engaging sculpture. Using no glue or pins but only the inexorable grasp of gravity, Carl Andre has stacked eight salvaged bricks on edge, exposing the brand name embossed on their faces: EMPIRE. Patina'd with crusty mortar and paint, they teeter precariously, verging on collapse since the work's 1986 inception. Christened *Manifest Destiny*—a mordant title under Reagan, now made truly scary through W.'s cowboy antics—the pitted red clay and worn inscriptions are reminiscent of the exhumed detritus of many an overreaching empire.

Quick—catch it before it falls.