

WHITNEY IN CENTRAL PARK

The Whitney Museum's Biennial this spring includes five large-scale artworks by contemporary New York artists commissioned for specific sites in Central Park. This is the first time the park has been part of a major museum exhibit, and also the first time the [Whitney Biennial](#) has exhibited art in an outdoor public space. The installations, organized by the

[Public Art Fund](#)

, include a fifty-foot-high leafless tree made of stainless steel near a stand of magnificent American elms, and an ephemeral series of splashes beneath Bow Bridge that appear to be caused by something being dropped into the water.

"Central Park has had a long history of displaying public art on both a permanent and temporary basis," said Rick Lepkowski, spokesman for the Central Park Conservancy, the nonprofit organization that manages the park. There are traditional statues like the Angel of the Waters at Bethesda Fountain, the only sculpture commissioned during the original design of Central Park. The Public Art Fund sponsors rotating exhibits of contemporary sculpture at the Doris C. Freedman Plaza on Fifth Avenue at 60th Street, and temporary individual pieces have been displayed occasionally in other parts of the park.

Although the exhibition in Central Park was arranged before Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg took office, it could be a harbinger of more ambitious public art to come during his administration. At the press conference announcing the opening of the Whitney Biennial in Central Park, Mayor Bloomberg indicated that he would be open to reconsidering a proposal made in 1981 by the artist Christo and his wife Jeanne-Claude for a work covering the entire landscape of Central Park. At the time, the Parks department rejected the installation, called "The Gates," partly because of the crowds it would draw. The concept, which can be viewed on a [web site devoted to the artists](#),

involves framing the park's pathways with a series of fifteen-foot-high metal gates. Suspended from each gate would be a free-hanging, golden-colored woven panel meant to wave in the wind toward the next gate. Mayor Bloomberg, who was a board member of the Central Park Conservancy at the time, had argued strongly in favor of the Christo project.

BEETLE THREAT

A much less welcome arrival in Central Park this year is the Asian long-horned beetle. In January, during a survey of the park, the U.S. Department of Agriculture discovered the imported pest in two trees in the Hallett Nature Sanctuary, a fenced-off grove of trees in the southeast corner of the park. The Asian long-horned beetle first appeared in New York City in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, in 1996. It has since infiltrated trees in other parts of Brooklyn, in Bayside and Flushing, Queens, and in several locations in Manhattan. The parks department is working

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by Anne Schwartz

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with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets to determine whether the beetle has infected additional trees in the park. The agencies are also injecting Central Park trees with the pesticide imidacloprid to test whether it can prevent the spread of the beetle. But as of now, the only sure way to kill the beetle and its eggs and to stop it from moving to other trees is to cut down, chip, and burn infested trees. So far, the city has had to destroy about 3,500 infested street, park, and backyard trees. The parks department recently received a state forestry grant of \$200,000 to replace trees all over the city that had to be felled because of the beetle.

The one- to one-and-a-half-inch beetle is shiny black with white spots, and long, black-and-white banded antennae. It chews depressions in the bark of trees to lay its eggs. Once hatched, the larvae tunnel into a tree's interior to feed, killing the tree. Characteristic signs of the beetle are pencil- or dime-sized holes in upper tree trunks; piles of sawdust at the base of the tree or where branches meet the trunk; and dark stains from sap seeping out of the holes. The insect has a preference for maples, but will lay its eggs in many other types of hardwood trees. To report beetle sightings, call 1-877-stop-alb. For more information, check the [USDA web site](#)

THE PARK WITHOUT CARS?

While the city is adding art to Central Park, some people would like to see another element subtracted: the automobile. [Car-Free Central Park](#), a campaign of Transportation Alternatives, an advocate for pedestrians and cyclists, is calling for a ban on car traffic on the park's loop drive. (This would not affect the four sunken east-west transverse roads, which Olmsted and Vaux designed to minimize the impact of traffic.) The group's immediate goal is a three-month summer moratorium, to see how traffic patterns and park use would be affected. The new Speaker of the City Council, Gifford Miller, is on record as supporting the eviction of cars from Central Park, but Mayor Michael Bloomberg has said, "not in your or my lifetime." Campaign leaders aim to gather 100,000 signatures in a petition drive, which they hope will convince the mayor to change his mind.

FIRST BUDGET HEARING

The Parks and Recreation committee of the New York City Council held a hearing March 19 on the parks department budget, the first step in the council's consideration of Mayor Bloomberg's proposed cuts to the city's 2003 budget. The mayor has called for across-the-board cuts of 13 percent to most city agencies, with additional "contingency" reductions of 7.5 percent.

The hearing was the first held by the newly created stand-alone council committee on parks and recreation. Committee chairman Joseph Addabbo, Jr., led off the session saying that this

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"affects real people," and that the loss of funding would have an impact on the safety and condition of the parks. "If you want to see a community go down the tubes," he said, "just neglect the parks."

Noting the seriousness of the city's current deficit, the new parks commissioner, Adrian Benepe, told the committee, "It is not enough to say you must increase the budget of an agency without identifying where it will come from." Later testimony from representatives of civic and park groups called for restoring the money the mayor proposed to cut from the parks budget. Among those speaking was former parks commissioner Henry Stern. He said the city should give the revenue from park concessions to the parks budget instead of the city's general fund, reminding the committee that most council members and the mayor had promised to do this during the election.



Anne Schwartz is a freelance writer specializing in environmental issues. Previously, she was the editor of the Audubon Activist, a news journal for environmental action published by the National Audubon Society, and an editor at The New York Botanical Garden.