

"Sundial"

Ian Hamilton Finlay

"Sundial" by Ian Hamilton Finlay and cut by Michael Harvey. Slate and cast concrete. The work is located at the University of Kent, Canterbury, England.



The Public Word

Alison Sky

... Walls which speak and

Prior to the last hundred years, poetry functioned as a catalyst between language and environment. As Archibald MacLeish observed in *Poetry and Experience*,³ "There was no difference between public world and private world so far as the meanings of poetry were concerned down to the time we live in... By the end of the last century all this had changed." The change MacLeish acknowledges is one of literary content, rather than fundamental concept. The issue that I shall address is concerned with the role of poetry as part of the iconography of the public domain.

Within conventional definitions, poetry has "tried everything." It has evolved from legend, passed through generations by word of mouth, developed a complex and formalized written discipline which (particularly in this century) has been transformed into visual imagery, and dematerialized into sound and silence. It has been constructed, re-constructed, integrated, and disintegrated—yet always as part of a recognizable continuum. If it has ever ventured outside the written or spoken page, it has usually not been considered poetry.

The evolutionary process of this development has been an issue of urgent public concern. Even its disintegration has met with intense reaction (as the rioting audiences at Dada events of sound poetry illustrate). Yet at some point in the increasing "privatization" of poetry, it receded from our vocabulary as well. As MacLeish continues, "Poets and politicians both agree, though for

opposite reasons, that poetry has no place in the public world... It is a curious situation for many reasons and not the least because the public street is precisely where we live our lives in this century... Our dreams are public. Even our terrors are public, and nevertheless we won't have our poetry out-of-doors."

In the decision to abandon the "public domain" to a totally pragmatic development of our environment, a certain urgency was lost in poetry—a combination of avoiding gut concerns and a failure to deal with those concerns in a way that communicated emotional response. A case in point is demonstrated by the many fine but ineffectual poems pertaining to Vietnam when contrasted with the emotional intensity of one graphic poster illustrating the Mi Lai massacre.

We have now lived with our totally utilitarian cities and have come to find them somewhat deficient. Pragmatism has proven to be like a question with only one answer, and it is always the same no matter how the question is rephrased. This is not the only confusing revelation we have been forced to face. We have come to realize the only infinite aspect of earth is the imagination of man, and it is this imagination which has been abandoned.

Woodrow Wilson once said, "Business underlies everything in our national life." Christopher Tunnard⁶ has added to this, "And nowhere is it more true than in these cities where American business has created its own work of art, the skyscraper."