

## The Manhole Cover Project: A Gun Legacy

By James Rondeau (1996)

### I. Public Art as Public Intervention

In recent years, a variety of innovative visual artists have shaped a new, hybrid form of cultural practice, fusing aesthetic pursuits with political activism, social work, and community organizing. In the process, they have reconfigured the landscape of equestrian statues, historic plaques, spouting fountains, and abstract modernist sculptures that once defined 'public' art.

This new kind of public art, like much art since the 1960s, is concerned with breaking down the barriers between artistic practice and actual, lived experience. Over the last several decades contemporary visual artists have moved beyond the established conventions of painting and sculpture, challenging age-old assumptions about the function of the artist and the nature of the art object. As our understanding of art has changed alongside our understanding of public space, artists have pioneered a variety of new strategies for working outside of the traditional museum or gallery context. Without attempting to speak in universal terms or through conventional fine art objects, many artists are creating work that is entirely dependent upon particular moments in time and particular environments.

In many cases, artists have chosen to focus on the qualities of a specific place and the relationship of that place to its history and to its various audiences. These artists often become researchers and cultural historians, using a knowledge of history as a way to add depth and resonance to our sense of place. By understanding the forces that shaped our past, artists and critics have argued, we are better able to articulate our understanding of and our responses to the specific challenges of the present.

The Manhole Cover Project, engineered by artist Bradley McCallum, is a community based, collaborative public art project which responds both to Hart-ford's past as well as

to the living voices of Hartford's present in an attempt to gain perspective on the problems of gun violence in this city. At the center of McCallum's project is the relationship between the unique role of the gun in Hartford's history and the high cost of gun violence in this same city today. As Wadsworth Atheneum Curator of American Decorative Arts William Hosley recently observed, "you can't have Hartford without the gun."

## II. The City and the Gun: Then

The second half of the nineteenth century was a period of intense social, economic, and political change for Hartford, as it was for the rest of the nation. No individual figure better exemplifies Hartford's transition from a failing agrarian town to a thriving, industrialized metropolitan center than Samuel Colt. In October of 1847, Colt established his first firearms factory in Hartford. Eight years later, he built the largest, most sophisticated private firearms factory in the world on the banks of the Connecticut River, putting to rest any lingering doubts about the city's immediate economic prospects. With the success of Colt's enterprise came the building blocks of modern Hartford — a large immigrant work force, a vast industrial fortune, and a surge of civic philanthropy.

From the beginning, Colt's venture and the civic health of Hartford were inextricably intertwined.<sup>1</sup> Sam Colt's invention, and the foundation of his industrial fortune, was the first practical repeating revolver.<sup>2</sup> Although the idea of a revolving mechanism — one that allowed the user to fire several consecutive shots without having to reload — had existed for several centuries, the gun that Colt perfected was eminently portable, free of mechanical difficulties, and easy to use. In order to realize his revolutionary invention on a grand scale, Colt also developed a system of mass-production, using an assembly line and interchangeable parts, that was admired and adopted by industries across the country as Hartford emerged as the worldwide capital of firearms production. The name Colt became synonymous with nineteenth-century American ingenuity and heroism, and more specifically, with the gun. Indeed, the famous Colt .45 — 'the gun that won the West' — has endured as one of the most romanticized icons of American bravado.

Sam Colt died in 1862, leaving behind one of the world's greatest industrial empires and immense private wealth. Colt's widow, Elizabeth, spent the next fifty years burnishing her husband's reputation (and building her own) as a philanthropist and civic reformer. Her extensive charitable contributions to the city of Hartford included the founding of schools, churches, relief agencies for the poor, and a city park, many of which (including an entire wing of the Wadsworth Atheneum) still bear the Colt name. Together, the Colts transformed the face of the city. By the late nineteenth century, Hartford had become one of the definitive cities of the new American renaissance. Industry thrived alongside a rich intellectual and cultural life, and the city was noted as home to some of the nation's most distinguished citizens. Sam and Elizabeth Colt brought the prosperity of the 'Gilded Age' to New England, making Hartford one of the most prosperous communities in the nation. The environment they helped to shape clearly echoes their presence to this day.<sup>3</sup>

### III. The City and the gun: now

Few U.S. cities in the last one hundred years have experienced a more dramatic change of fortune than Hartford. The unparalleled prosperity of the second half of the nineteenth century stands in high contrast to the precipitous decline that has marked the final decades of the twentieth century. Today, although Connecticut is the wealthiest state in the union by per capita income, Hartford has been ranked as the fourth poorest city in the nation. By population, it is the most rapidly shrinking major city in the United States, with a child poverty rate more than four times the state average, a teen pregnancy rate nearly three times the state average, and a rate of 'unoccupied youth' (not in school, employed, or in military service) more than twice the state average.<sup>4</sup> Hartford's crime statistics are similarly alarming. There were more homicides in Hartford in 1995 than there were in many industrialized nations of western Europe — thirty-six in total, twenty-five of them gun related — down from an all-time high of fifty-eight in 1994. Although the 1995 drop in homicide rates occurred in every region of the country and in cities of almost every size, the apparently optimistic figures mask an explosion in the rate of gun violence among urban youth.

Since 1985, national teenage homicide rates (for both victims and perpetrators) have more than doubled, with guns accounting for almost all of the additional deaths among teens. One recent study found that 84% of gun carriers acquired their first gun before the age of fifteen.<sup>5</sup> Teenagers in Hartford are more at risk of becoming a victim of gun violence today than at any other time in the last fifty years, as homicide has become the leading cause of death among adolescents fifteen to nineteen years old. A recent survey of teens from the greater Hartford area registers the impact of these devastating facts, indicating that 61% of youth worry about becoming a victim of violent crime, and 54% have themselves witnessed a violent crime.<sup>6</sup> At the heart of The Manhole Cover Project is the poignant irony that a city which once flourished from the manufacture of weapons is now being destroyed by violence.

Although Hartford has been hit hard by the rising tides of urban crime and violence, the statistics for this city mirror a nation-wide pandemic. Firearm violence is currently the leading cause of injury-related death in many states, second in some places only to automobile accidents.<sup>7</sup> A gun is manufactured every ten seconds in the United States, and every eleven seconds another gun is imported. Every two minutes somebody in the U.S. is shot with one of these guns, and every fourteen minutes one of those shots proves fatal. Urban youth are at the center of the crisis. More teenagers die of gunshot wounds annually than from all other natural diseases combined. For black males between the ages of five and nineteen, gun homicide already has become the leading cause of death nationwide.

The unprecedented number of deaths and injuries from guns has prompted medical and health-care professionals across the country to shift the terms of discussion which surround issues of gun control and violence prevention. Public and private organizations throughout the nation are working to frame gun violence as a public health crisis fueled by the calculated market expansion of an inherently dangerous consumer product. As gun violence is increasingly addressed as a public health issue and not simply as a criminal justice issue to be mandated and contained by the police and the court system, a variety

of new strategies and partnerships have emerged in the areas of education and prevention. Collaborative public art programs like The Manhole Cover Project are but one of the many important manifestations of community-based responses to the problem of gun violence.

#### IV. The City and the Gun Reconsidered: The Manhole Cover Project

Over the course of the last year, McCallum — together with the Childhood Injury Prevention Center of Connecticut Children's Medical Center in Hartford (CCIPC) — has been working with a team of local students to explore issues of gun violence in the city today. At the Wadsworth Atheneum the project is represented by the exhibition of 228 custom-designed manhole covers weighing 39,216 pounds, the exact equivalent to the weight of the 11,194 guns confiscated by Connecticut State Police since 1992 (1 January 1992 - 31 July 1996). Audio testimonies collected by five Hartford students this past summer feature individuals in Hartford whose lives have been profoundly affected by gun violence. These local voices form a crucial part of the installation.

In 1992, Connecticut Governor Lowell Weicker enacted an executive order requiring the destruction of all weapons confiscated in the line of duty by State Police. Prior to this legislation, confiscated guns were sold at public auction.<sup>8</sup> During the past four years Connecticut law enforcement officials have sent more than nineteen tons of confiscated weapons to be melted down at a Massachusetts foundry, the same cast-iron facility which manufactures the manhole covers used in many Connecticut cities, including Hartford. Over the last several years, gun metal has been removed from and returned to the streets of Hartford in the form of manhole covers, quietly transforming actual weapons into silent memorials for the scores of those injured or killed as a result of gun violence in this city. The Manhole Cover Project gives both form and voice to these otherwise silent memorials.

At the close of the exhibition, a portion of these artist-designed covers will be put into use on the streets of Hartford, around the museum and in various neighborhoods throughout the city that have been hit particularly hard by gun violence.<sup>9</sup> During the course of the exhibition the covers themselves are displayed on nineteen wooden pallets,

emphasizing the fact that they are only sited at the museum temporarily. Once deployed, the life span of the covers in the street ranges from forty to one-hundred years. As Hartford-based writer Owen McNally recently observed, even at their lowest levels the lifespan of the covers will be more than double the lifespan of many shooting victims, providing a long-term reminder of the complexity of Hartford's gun legacy. The result will be an enduring project at once about and of the city of Hartford.

McCallum's design modifies the city's existing manhole cover pattern in two important ways. Each individual cover is clearly emblazoned with the text **MADE FROM 172 LBS OF YOUR CONFISCATED GUNS**, a message which, in effect, tells the story of the object's own history. The language offers both a straight-forward didactic as well as a call to action. McCallum intends the purposely vague pronoun *your* to suggest a sense of collective responsibility through the metaphor of collective ownership. These are not someone else's guns, McCallum is saying, these are our guns.

Each cover also bears the Latin phrase **VINCIT QUI PATITUR**, and two possible understandings of the phrase in translation. The brief Latin inscription is very much a part of the formal vocabulary of epitaphs and engraved remembrances, themselves hallmarks of conventional sculptural memorials. As such, its presence on these artist-designed manhole covers at first may seem to be an uncomplicated and straightforward tribute to the memories of the dead and injured. The reference is, however, far more layered than it may initially appear to be. Although not directly attributed here, *Vincit Qui Patitur* was the Colt family motto and is alternately understood to mean *He Who Perseveres Is Victorious* or *He Who Suffers Conquers*, depending upon the interpretation of the translator. McCallum was drawn to the ambiguous meaning of the original motto in its English translation, and to the ways in which our understanding of these once-romanticized notions of strength and suffering have changed over time.

In the most basic sense, this reference to Sam Colt makes explicit the ironic link between Hartford's history as a center of weapons manufacturing and an object that represents confiscated firearms. In a strange way, the invocation of the memory of Sam and Elizabeth Colt — who each in their own way played a leading role in the creation of the

infrastructure of modern Hartford — on a manhole cover can be read as an appropriate re-framing of the traditional understanding of the Colt legacy.

On another level, the inclusion of the motto references the legacies of certain aspects of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American social thought. Perhaps no one better embodied the quintessentially ‘American’ ideals of hard work, determination, and success than Sam Colt himself, who once said "If I can't be first, I won't be second in anything." In the context of contemporary gun violence, however, McCallum reminds us that the romantic and heroic readings of perseverance and triumph evidenced by the Colt motto — and rooted in the allegedly egalitarian democratic principals of the ‘American dream’ — do not match the realities of contemporary urban life in the United States. Considered from a contemporary perspective, the words of the Colt motto become a poignant reminder that the terms of ‘only the strongest survive’ change radically when one accounts for the proliferation of illegal guns on the streets of our cities.

The temporary outdoor installation on the museum's North Terrace provides a context for the covers as a group of objects before they are put into use in the streets as individual manhole covers. A set of metal doors leading from the terrace into a museum gallery has been painted a particular shade of light green, echoing the color of oxidized metal found on many of the public sculptures and memorial plaques around the museum, as well as on the exterior architecture of the museum and several neighboring buildings. The reference begins to frame the project in the visual vocabulary of a type of public memorial prevalent throughout the downtown area. Text printed on the darkened glass of two exterior museum windows — printed in the same light green — provides additional information about the nature of illegal weapons use in Connecticut. Viewers of the installation learn that the weapons confiscated in Connecticut since 1992 were manufactured at 258 armories, 119 of which are based outside of the country. Of the 139 armories based in the U.S., 35 are in New England, ten in Connecticut, and one (Colt Industries) in nearby West Hartford. The text also provides a statistical breakdown of the types of guns confiscated and the nature of gun-related violence in Connecticut.

For the duration of the exhibition here, the artist has created a space where the issue of gun violence can be thought through and discussed, where information can be exchanged, stories can be told, and lost lives can be remembered. In another respect, McCallum's project moves beyond the contemplative to the confrontational. Viewers of the installation will be faced with the stacks of the covers en masse. The overwhelming physical presence of 39,216 pounds of metal — and the equation of that group of objects with the 11,194 weapons confiscated since 1992 — provokes an immediate and visceral reaction. Taken together, the number of covers is a sobering reminder of the scale of local illegal gun use.

#### V. Listening to Local Voices: The Recorded Testimonials

As an artist, McCallum also treats sound as a sculptural material. In this installation, the massive piles of cold iron are contrasted sharply with the recorded voices that emanate from the exhibition space. The process of collecting these taped, oral histories — given by local residents who have volunteered to share their personal experiences with gun violence — has been at the heart of The Manhole Cover Project. As with much public art of this kind, the 'art' is as much in the process as it is in the product, as artists like McCallum choose to move outside of the studio and into local communities for extended periods of time. The oral history component of the project is the result of a four-month long intensive project led by McCallum, under the supervision of the Connecticut Childhood Injury Prevention Center, with a team of local students. At the artist's request, CCIPC caseworkers spread the word that McCallum was looking for Hartford students who were interested in community-based work to spend the summer on a field-recording project on the topic of youth gun violence in Hartford. After two days of extensive interviewing, McCallum engaged five students from local schools (including a middle school, the three public high schools, and a community college.) These five paid volunteers are Chevoughn Augustin, 17; Nashia Baskerville, 14; Myrton Bewry, 19; Josue Evilla, 17; and David Robles, 18. To prepare for the project, McCallum and the students began a six week orientation, meeting two or three times each week as a group in order to get to know one another and to familiarize themselves with the complexity of

the issues at hand. The artist led discussions which introduced the students to the idea of oral history and testimonials, worked with the students on their interviewing skills, and facilitated informational meetings with professionals from a variety of social service organizations. The students also learned the technical operations of field recording and editing with professional audio equipment.

Through the resources of CCIPC, other social service organizations, grief-support groups, and their own personal contacts, the students met with individuals whose lives had been affected by gun violence. Each interview led to new contacts. Over the course of several months, the students spent an average of twenty hours each week on the project. At the end of the summer, they had spoken with more than seventy-five individuals and recorded twenty complete interviews. From these recordings, four distinct categories of speakers emerged: family members of victims of gun-related death; youth who had witnessed an act of gun violence or who had themselves been shot; perpetrators of gun violence; and public health officials who deal with gun-related injury. Together, McCallum and the students began the long process of transcription and editing. Ultimately, they produced four distinct audio tracks, one for each of the four categories.<sup>10</sup> During the course of the installation, these four audio sequences, each wired to four distinct speakers, play on a constant loop. The speakers are mounted on four free-standing pylons, each seven and one-half feet high and constructed of plate steel and tempered glass. Light emanates from behind the frosted glass panels, which are inscribed with text identifying the voices heard from each pylon. In the cold winter months, self-contained heating units will warm visitors as they stand and listen to the recordings. Entering the installation space, the visitor's experience of seeing the stacks of transformed guns will instantly be framed by the voices of individuals who know what those guns have done. Listening to their emotionally charged and intensely personal stories, the visitor is asked to move from passive spectator to voyeur, from empathic listener to witness.

Vi. The Museum as Agent, the City as Site

For McCallum the idea of the city street exists as both metaphor and actual site, a place where the most tragic manifestations of urban decay meet the most rudimentary operations of urban maintenance. As one listens to the voices of the doctors and nurses who treat gun injury, even the most basic linguistic components of the project — ‘man’ and ‘hole’ — begin to conjure images of bullet wounds. With the idea of the street as a point of departure, McCallum has engineered a subtle but poignant intervention in the pre-existing cycle of weapons confiscation and manhole cover production, reclaiming a portion of confiscated gun metal as a way to reclaim the memory of the dead and injured.

Importantly, McCallum has chosen to work within a pre-existing, self-perpetuating social system. Harnessing an overtly productive and pro-social system of urban maintenance for his own artistic practice, McCallum’s intervention can be read on one level as an act of empowerment. By implication, the artist offers an analogy to the similarly self-perpetuating and often overlooked cycles of crime and violence, and their overtly destructive and anti-social consequences on the infrastructure of urban life. As a sculptural practice, the impact of the project on ‘life in the streets’ is rendered in the most literal of terms. With the planned deployment of each manhole cover, a memory of civic history and a cautionary reminder of the toll of gun violence will be imbedded in the streets of Hartford.

McCallum does not pretend, however, that the project offers any real solutions to the problems of gun violence in this city. Rather, the project engages diverse audiences in the process of translating a local manifestation of a pressing social problem into a meaningful set of aesthetic and cultural metaphors. With this operational paradigm as a basis, innovative public artists and their collaborators can illuminate the myriad ways in which each of us can deal constructively with overwhelming social problems.<sup>11</sup>

At the core of the project is McCallum’s commitment to bringing voices and stories that usually exist outside of the structures of institutional power inside of the art museum. Indeed, The Manhole Cover Project inverts the traditional power relations that often define the position of the museum in regard to the neighboring community. With the

artistic collaboration rooted in neighborhoods throughout Hartford, members of the local gallery and museum world — usually positioned as art-world ‘insiders’ — become the outsiders.<sup>12</sup> In this way, The Manhole Cover Project continues the process of redefining the role and position of visual art museums in the second half of the twentieth century. Throughout its 154 year history, the Wadsworth Atheneum has existed as a safehouse for the display and preservation of objects and artifacts of artistic and historical merit. In this sense, the museum can function as a kind of final stop for a work of art after it has had a life in the real world. Historically, museums have performed this role in relative isolation, often preferring to remain insulated from the pressing social problems of the world outside their walls. With The Manhole Cover Project, however, the museum acts in partnership with other institutions as both a catalyst for direct social engagement and as a temporary site for a group of objects en route to a long and productive life outside the museum. Projects like this one suggest that the museum has a meaningful role to play as a home for ideas as well as objects, for collaborative exchanges as well individual artistic expressions, and for social and political discourse as well as aesthetics sensibilities.

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Copyright 1996 Footnotes:

1 Today, the famed Connecticut gun maker has been struggling to keep their once thriving business alive after a decade of turmoil that has included a four year strike, two buyouts, and a Chapter 11 bankruptcy filing.

2 On exhibition at the Wadsworth Atheneum, along with a larger display of guns, European and American painting, sculpture, and decorative arts from the Colt’s private collection, as part of Sam and Elizabeth: The Legend and Legacy of Colt’s Empire, 8 September - 9 March 1996.

3 Hartford’s economy and reputation were built on more than just guns, however. A number of major manufacturing operations established themselves in Hartford following

Colt, and Hartford became well known for the production of bicycles, sewing machines, typewriters and a variety of other goods. After the gun, however, the city has been most readily identified with the insurance industry. In fact, long after the Colt empire began to wane, Hartford continued to thrive as an international center for the insurance industry. The affiliation between Hartford and its famous industries was ironically underscored by Mark Twain in an address he delivered at a dinner party in Hartford in 1874, welcoming a distinguished dinner guest from London to the city: He said "I am glad, indeed, to assist in welcoming the distinguished guest of this occasion to a city whose fame as an insurance center has extended to all lands, and given us the name of being a quadruple band of brothers working sweetly hand in hand - the Colt arms company making the destruction of our race easy and convenient, our life-insurance citizens paying for the victims when they pass away."

4. Mike Swift "Some leaders call shrinking population an `opportunity'," The Hartford Courant 9 February 1994, p. B1+.

5 Peter Ash, MD; Arthur L. Kellerman, MD, MPH; Dawna Fuqua-Whitley, MA; Amri Johnson. "Gun Acquisition and use by Juvenile Offenders," Journal of American Medicine vol. 275 no. 22 (12 June 1996) p. 1754

6. Joseph Rocha "Hartford program shows legacy of violence in a real life `ER', city youth shown cruel consequences," The Hartford Courant, 15 February 1996, p. B1.

7 In addition to firearm homicide, the impact of injuries caused by guns extends to suicide and unintentional shootings, as well. A recent study found that of 219 firearm-related deaths, 68% were homicides, 25% suicides, 6% unintentional, and 1% were undetermined. From Robert W. Zavoski, MD, MPH; Garry D. Lapidus, PA-C, MPH; Trudy J. Lehrer, MS. "A Population-Based Study of Severe Firearm Injury Among Children and Youth," Pediatrics vol. 96 no. 2 (August 1995) p. 278+.

8. The majority of the over 3,000 guns that the police confiscated each year were already being destroyed, however. Only high-quality handguns and long guns were sold at auction. The state sold 932 guns for \$140,767 in fiscal year 1991 and 740 guns for \$124,167 in fiscal year 1992. In response to these sales, many legislators and gun-control advocates protested the state's role in adding to the number of guns in circulation each year, especially in order to make a profit. Weicker's June 1992 edict stipulated that all

contraband guns, except for a small number retained by the State Police for departmental use, will be destroyed.

9 The process of securing the support of Hartford's Metropolitan District Commission, the governing body which oversees the production, purchase, and use of sewer covers in the city, began in November 1994. Mayor Mike Peters endorsed the project in October 1995 and helped to negotiate a series of discussions with the MDC. McCallum was able to approach the initially reticent MDC armed with letters of support from a variety of civic leaders and health care and social service professionals. McCallum's wide range of community supporters included individuals from the Department of Pediatrics at Hartford Hospital; Connecticut Halfway Houses Inc.; Drugs Don't Work/The Governor's Partnership for Connecticut's Work-force; The Hartford chapter of Catholic Family Services; Mi Casa My House/Family Service and Educational Center; The Southside Institutions Neighborhood Alliance/A Coalition for Neighborhood Improvement; The Hartford Area Mediation Program/An Affiliate of the Connecticut Prison Association; The Village for Families and Children Inc.; and The Urban League of Greater Hartford. Although the artist was assured of the MDC's support early on in the project, the Commission formally voted to approve the use of the covers in the street on 15 October 1996.

10 Typed transcripts of the audio program are available upon request at the information desk in the main entrance lobby of the museum.

11 See Mary Jane Jacob. "Outside the Loop," in *Culture In Action*, (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995) p. 60

12. See Michael Brenson. "Healing in Time," in *Culture In Action*, (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995) p. 19.