



George Segal's *Gay Liberation*

by Claude J. Summers

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In 1979, pop sculptor George Segal was commissioned by the Mildred Andrews Fund, a private Cleveland-based foundation that supports public art, to create a work that would commemorate New York City's Stonewall Rebellion, the 1969 riot that conveniently (if somewhat simplistically) marks the beginning of the modern gay liberation movement.

The result was the first piece of public art commemorating the struggle of glbtq people for equality, predating Amsterdam's "Homomonument" by some seven years.

Tellingly, Segal's sculpture has, from the very beginning, been at the center of controversy and suffered the kinds of assaults and bashings that glbtq people themselves have all too often experienced.

The Sculpture

The sculpture, a life-like, life-size bronze group, painted white, depicts four figures: a standing male couple and a seated female couple. One of the men holds the shoulder of his partner; one of the seated women gently touches her friend's thigh. The poses are non-dramatic, but quietly powerful, suggesting depths of love and companionship.

Segal's aim in his depiction of the couples was to normalize and domesticize homosexual relationships, rescuing them from the sensationalized, over-sexualized images so common in the popular media. At the same time, however, Segal emphasizes the physical element of relationships. The partners' soulful gazing into each other's eyes symbolizes commitment and communion, but their touching represents physical intimacy.

As David Lindsey has observed, "'Gay Liberation' is all about touch and tender, affirmative embrace."

The artist himself remarked, "The sculpture concentrates on tenderness, gentleness and sensitivity as expressed in gesture. It makes the delicate point that gay people are as feeling as anyone else."

The political significance of the mundane reality of loving couples is suggested by the title, "Gay Liberation."

Segal's choice to define gay liberation in terms of ordinary, committed relationships is itself profoundly political. It quietly but unmistakably affirms the unexceptionable observation that the aspirations of gay men and lesbians are no different from those of heterosexual couples. The personal is made political in this case not by the artist or by the couples, but by the social and legal prohibitions against the most basic of human needs, the need to love and be loved.

Some critics complained that the figures appear too sad, but the complex interior life the figures display



George Segal's *Gay Liberation* in New York's Sheridan Park (top) and on the campus of Stanford University. The photograph of *Gay Liberation* in New York City courtesy J. Peter Benet. The photograph of the sculpture on the Stanford University campus courtesy Helen B. Brooks.

expresses, at least in part, the ambiguous place gay men and lesbians occupy in the American public consciousness, surely cause enough for sadness.

The subsequent history of the sculpture illustrates the difficulties some people have in accepting even so elemental a premise as the humanity of glbtq people, as well as the impossibility of satisfying completely the needs of a diverse and sometimes divided community.

The Controversy

The idea for a sculpture to honor the gay and lesbian rights movement on the tenth anniversary of Stonewall originated with Bruce Voeller (1944-1994), co-founder and first executive director of the National Gay Rights Task Force and the founder of the Mariposa Foundation.

Voeller approached Peter Putnam (1925-1987), an eccentric philanthropist who had established the Mildred Andrews Fund in honor of his mother, to finance the project. The terms for the commission specified only that the work "had to be loving and caring, and show the affection that is the hallmark of gay people. . . . And it had to have equal representation of men and women."

In addition, Putnam insisted that the memorial be installed on public land or nowhere at all.

Segal was, at first, uncertain about accepting the project. His initial reaction was that the sculpture should be done by a gay artist. But he finally concluded, "I'm extremely sympathetic to the problems that gay people have. They're human beings first. I couldn't refuse to do it."

The plan was to create two castings of "Gay Liberation" and to install them in two locations, in New York City's Sheridan Park, near the site of the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village, where the events of the summer of 1969 launched the gay liberation movement, and in Los Angeles.

However, even the famously liberal Village was not ready for gay liberation, at least in 1980. Although the sculpture was intended as a gift to the city, it had to be approved by a host of city organizations and community groups. Most of the Greenwich Village political leaders, including Representatives Theodore Weiss and Bella Abzug, endorsed the project, as did the *Village Voice* newspaper and the city's Director of Historic Parks.

However, many local residents opposed the plans for the installation. Some, mostly Italian Catholics, frankly objected to the subject matter, as they also objected to the gay men and lesbians who were moving into their neighborhood and changing its character. Others objected ostensibly on the grounds that the sculpture was too large for the park, that it was inappropriate to the neighborhood's architecture, and that it would attract undesirable elements and "ghettoize" the area.

Some gay men and lesbians opposed the installation as well. Some protested that the monument to Stonewall should be designed by a homosexual chosen by the community. Others complained that the figures were "cruising clones" and not sufficiently representative of the community.

Anonymous notes and telephone calls to city hall threatened to blow up the statue.

Although "Gay Liberation" had been approved by the city's Fine Arts Commission, Community Board Two, and the Landmarks Commission, the city failed to allocate the funding to install the work and to provide landscape architecture for the park.

The casting that had been made for installation in Los Angeles met a similar fate. The local government refused to accept the work.

Move to Stanford

Given the reaction against the statue by the residents and governments of New York City and Los Angeles, the decision was made to seek an alternate site for the sculpture. It was decided to offer "Gay Liberation" for installation on the Stanford University campus in Palo Alto, California, a campus famous for its public sculptures.

After much wrangling, and the approval of two faculty committees and the president of the university, the Stanford Board of Regents finally voted to accept the sculpture as a long-term loan.

Less than a month after the sculpture was installed in February 1984, the work was attacked with a ball-peen hammer. The vandal(s) struck the figures about 40 times, gouging the faces and torsos, and inflicting an estimated \$50,000 worth of damage. The statue was removed from display and placed in storage.

The assault sent a chill through the glbtq community at Stanford and across the nation. That such a violent attack, so reminiscent of hate crimes almost routinely visited upon glbtq people, could take place on the campus of a major university, in the shadow of San Francisco, with its large and active gay and lesbian community, underscored the vulnerability of the lesbian and gay movement.

The day after "Gay Liberation" was attacked in 1984, members of the Stanford community began placing flowers at the site. A week later 200 people gathered in White Plaza to denounce the crime. Segal issued a statement, remarking that his point in "Gay Liberation" was "a human one regarding our common humanity with homosexuals. I'm distressed that disagreement with the statement took this violent, brutal form."

After being repaired the sculpture remained in storage for over a year, then was quietly re-installed. Less than a year later, however, it was attacked again. Someone spray-painted the word "AIDS" on the male couple.

In 1994, the sculpture was again vandalized, this time by several drunken members of Stanford's football team, who splattered the white statue with black paint and wedged a bench between two of the four figures, resulting in approximately \$8,000 worth of damage.

The local district attorney's office charged two of the students with felony vandalism and four with misdemeanor vandalism. At an on-campus forum, lesbian and gay students expressed their anger that hate-crime charges could not be brought because the California hate-crime statute is triggered only by the violation of an individual's--rather than an institution's--civil rights.

The glbtq community's anger was heightened into rage when a wrestling coach minimized the incident and attributed the uproar to "students [who] are almost force-fed political correctness" and to police who made sure that "everyone knew" about the incident.

The culprits were eventually sentenced to probation and community service. The judge suggested that they take a class in gay studies.

Installation in New York

The other casting of the sculpture was installed in a public park in Madison, Wisconsin and occasionally exhibited in galleries. In Madison, where it resided from 1986 until 1991, the sculpture was also vandalized on at least one occasion, though it was also beloved by many residents, who would sometimes place hats and scarves on the sculptural figures in the winter.

In 1992, however, New York City finally agreed to place *Gay Liberation* in Sheridan Park, just across the street from the site of Stonewall Inn.

At the dedication ceremony on June 23, 1992, Segal expressed surprise that there were no religious

protesters. One local resident explained that most of the neighbors who had objected to the original plans for the installation on religious grounds had either died or moved away.

Still, the installation in New York again ignited controversy. Some gay and lesbian groups continued to object that a straight man was chosen to memorialize Stonewall; others complained variously that gay and lesbian groups were not consulted about the design and that the depiction was too explicit, not sufficiently explicit, featured only middle-class white couples, privileged committed relationships, and omitted other elements of the glbtq community.

Eventually the controversy faded, and "Gay Liberation" is now a fully accepted and respected sight in the neighborhood for which it was originally intended.

The Artist

Segal took the criticisms from the radical groups in stride. Jokingly acknowledging himself as "an unregenerate heterosexual," he continued to insist that such a condition did not "prevent him from having an insight into the natures of my gay friends."

Segal, who was born on November 26, 1924 in New York City, was actually an obvious choice to design a monument to "Gay Liberation." By the time of the commission, he had become America's leading sculptor of public monuments and memorials. Besides, as Voeller remarked at one meeting, all the gay and lesbian artists of comparable stature, most of them deeply closeted, had turned down the commission.

Moreover, Segal had already demonstrated an unusual sensitivity in the depiction of lesbian couples in works such as "Lovers on a Bed I" (1976) and "The Girl Friends" (1969).

Segal was educated at Cooper Union, Pratt Institute, New York University, and Rutgers University. He earned an early reputation as a painter, but in the 1960s he turned to sculpture, using plaster casts of individuals--often friends and neighbors--to create life-like mannequins.

Associated with the pop artists of the 1960s, he created sculptures of ordinary people placed in everyday environments. His works are familiar in their subject matter and form, yet haunting in their ghostly stillness. In installations such as "The Subway" (1968) or "The Diner" (1964-1968) or "Walk, Don't Walk" (1976), he manages to convey interior feelings of loneliness and isolation, while also discovering the miracles of daily life.

Early in his career Segal avoided bronze, believing that it was too inert to achieve the expressive quality he sought. However, in 1971, with *The Dancers*, he developed a technique known as double-casting that used both plaster and bronze. In this technique, molten metal is poured into the interior of a plaster cast, reproducing in great detail the texture of skin and clothing. Using double-casting, he was able to create realistic, life-like figures that were also durable enough to function as permanent, outdoor, public art.

As a result of this process, "Gay Liberation" is at once literally "monumental" and intimate. It captures the ordinariness of the human interaction between the lovers, yet it also freezes the interaction in time and space and art. Hence, the sculpture underlines its important point about the humanity of the lovers, yet it does so simply and naturally by means of the intimacy it both captures and replicates.

Among Segal's other monuments are "In Memory of May 4, 1970: Abraham and Isaac" (1978), a memorial of the Kent State University slayings; the San Francisco Holocaust Memorial (1983); and sculptures for the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial in Washington, D. C. (1997).

Segal died from complications of cancer on June 9, 2000.

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