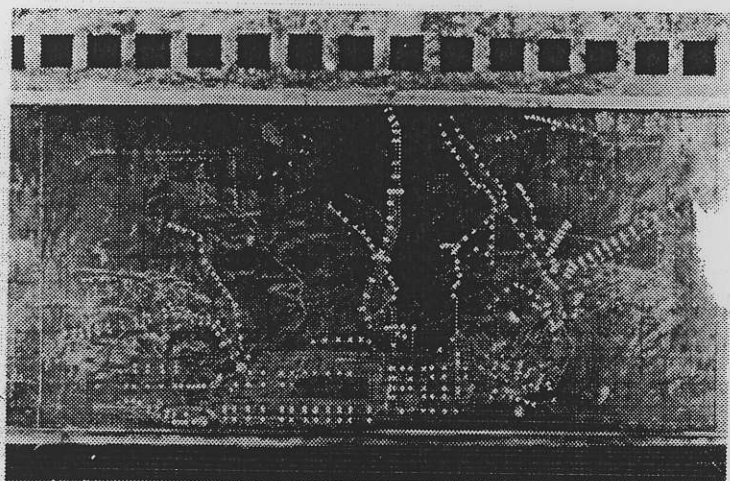


ARTFORUM

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I N T E R N A T I O N A L



Françoise Schein, model for *Proposal for a Metal Dazibao for New York City: A New York Circuitry*, 1985, mixed media with lights, 60 x 90½ x 6½".

Françoise Schein

Sarah Y. Rentschler Gallery

Most observers of urban life are intrigued with the explosion of scale that has occurred as 19th-century cities have become the metropolises of the late 20th century. Everything seems denser, vaster, and ungainly. But the most dramatic, yet less perceptible, shift in scale has actually occurred in the opposite direction, in the implosion of form and thought into the microchips of the computer-based technology that has become the principal operating force in large cities. This great disjunction of information and scale has led to a collective malaise and a pervasive sense of disreality.

Françoise Schein has produced a remarkable series of public art proposals and projects that are an attempt to bridge consciousness and reality, observable phenomena and imperceptible scale. Her process is disturbingly literal and richly metaphorical: she reproduces at various scales the circuits on which our cities are structured, visual equations of the micro-processor and the urban map. Through the development of a variable theme, she reveals a network for the comprehension of cultural cause and effect.

Schein's recent exhibition of schematic drawings and maquettes provided an overview of her proposals to date. Several of the most interesting projects involved the use of electronic imagery to outline aerial views of various cities. In Los Angeles and Brussels, for example, Schein took darkened underground passages and created dynamic megacircuits of flickering lights, neon, and video. While I suspect that none of these projects make any particular city more decipherable, they constitute systems of mapping that delineate cities rendered invisible by virtue of their complexity.

This spring, Schein will begin construction of her first major public installation in New York. In *Project of a Subway Map Floating in a New York Sidewalk*, stainless steel, lights, and glass rounds will be embedded in concrete to form a schema of the Manhattan underground transit system, re-creating on a diminished scale a plan that can never be seen. This project locates a particular place within the geography of a vast region while concretizing the codes that form and impart information.

Public art once operated as commemoration and inspiration. In the middle of the 20th century it became an art of personal inclination produced at civic scale. Schein is one of the few artists who is questioning the destiny of public art while proposing a new model based on information with collective impact. While I have reservations about the textualism of her connection between the computer and the city, and wonder how many variations this theme will successfully and freshly accommodate, there is a fascinating process of simulation and synthesis under way. Schein is not simply interested in art as information but in the validity and limits of information itself.

—PATRICIA C. PHILLIPS