In Hirshhorn WORKS—a special exhibition program—invited artists choose a site in the building or on the grounds to create a temporary work of art. The Hirshhorn believes that having artists work on site, using the museum as both studio and medium, not only enlivens and transforms this environment but sheds light on some of the motivations and issues underlying site-specific art—an important aspect of contemporary artistic expression.

Dennis Adams has been working in the public realm since 1978 when he displayed a work in ten windows on Eighth Avenue in Manhattan. In it, he alternated a series of texts with photographs of Patricia Hearst, the newspaper heiress who was kidnapped by the Symbionese Liberation Army in 1974. The discrepancies between the images and accompanying texts allowed for multiple readings of the work. Subsequently, Adams began framing his media-derived images with structural supports inspired by the city streets, for example kiosks, podia, and billboards. He occasionally eliminates language and exploits the precarious relationship between the images and architectural structures, resulting in a collapse of meaning between the two. In 1983 Adams began work on the series of bus shelters that have become his best-known works. He transformed those functional structures into dynamic ones of intersecting planes and angles. In place of the usual advertisements, the artist inserted images taken from media coverage of often controversial events in recent history, cropped so as to change their context. Adams’s topics are historical moments that are often willfully forgotten or repressed in the collective memory of society. He has created numerous public projects in Western Europe and the United States. The following text is edited from a January 5, 1990, interview with the artist.

Amada Cruz
Assistant Curator

AC: What attracted you to the tunnel at the Plaza entrance to the Sculpture Garden?
DA: I liked that it is on the cusp of the museum. It’s a site that spills out from the frame of the institution. In fact, if you trace the sight lines of its orientation, the tunnel points directly toward the Rotunda of the National Archives, which houses the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the Declaration of Independence. I was also drawn to the site because it’s underground, below the veneer of the city as it represents the voice of public authority. The site suggested the proposition of a subtext, the excavation of a hidden agenda, an idea quite in line
with the political intrigue of Washington, D. C.

**AC:** How did the larger context of Washington affect what you decided to do?

**DA:** I’ve always wanted to do a piece in Washington, even though the pervasive institutional tone of the city is unlike that in any other place I’ve worked. Washington presents a strong frame of reference. Everything in Washington spills out or points toward another structure or point of reference. I’m interested in the idea of sight lines and the way the lines of power here seem tied together. I’d like to intervene with those lines of power, so for me, the Hirshhorn is just one point on the grid, an entry level.

**AC:** How does your WORKS project at the Hirshhorn relate to other projects that you’re working on?

**DA:** Because I’m always working on many projects at the same time, it is inevitable that one project begins to collapse into another. A situation in one place might suggest ideas for another place. In fact, the great thing about ideas is that they’re always out of sync. They’re never where they should be. So you end up carrying around a lot of mental baggage, waiting for the right moment to unload it. The idea for the Hirshhorn installation first surfaced during a site visit in Newcastle, England. There, I saw an underground passage directly below a large billboard structure and thought about putting a still image and a moving image together or, perhaps, two still images together, one atop the other. While I eventually developed a project around a different site, the first image stuck with me. I found myself drawing and redrawing it during the airplane trip home. Then, a few months later when I came to the Hirshhorn for my first site visit, there it was again, in the image of a pedestrian tunnel. So in a strange way I’m grafting one city onto another. For me this is what it means to be an urbanist.

**AC:** What is the difference between working within the context of a museum and working in the more public realm of the city streets?

**DA:** I don’t think of the street as a place, necessarily, but as a metaphor for a certain kind of communication. At every level the street is opposed to the institutional. Potentially the site of social transgression, the street’s boundaries can only be inscribed through time and circumstance in the moment when the social and political erupt. In this sense, the street can be recovered in other terms and situations as a metaphor for a whole range of subversive operations. In other words, if we think historically of the boulevard as it sprang up in nineteenth-century France,
it was essentially a modernist reaction against the street. All technology is an attempt to displace the idea of the street because it is a transgression in which public and social codes collide in an image that becomes very difficult to control. With the boulevards, the idea was to cut through the street networks of Paris in order to create a line of sight, and that sight line ties to power and control. So, when I’m invited to work within the museum context, I look for a point or points of rupture. More often than not, I address entrance and exit areas, transitional sites where the power base of the institution is not so entrenched or, at the very least, falls under multiple jurisdictions. One reason I was interested in working at the entrance of the Sculpture Garden tunnel is because that site is in jeopardy. I like the fact that several years ago it was closed and converted to a storage area and now is slated for demolition. As an image, a structure, it is an institutional anachronism, a weak link in the territorial network—there for the taking.

AC: The photographs you use are decontextualized in their cropping and placement. You don’t normally use any kind of explanatory text. Where does that leave the viewer?
DA: I want to break down the dependency between text and image, shift the ground rules of representation. I’m interested as much in amnesia as I am in memory. The photographs I use are filtered through a series of architectural displacements in which, I hope, a sense of recovery and loss of meaning are operating simultaneously. The viewer’s disturbance is the text of my work.

AC: Your work is socially oriented, yet the viewpoint is often open-ended. Do you have a political agenda?
DA: I work with the idea of making visible what is collectively repressed. This repression more often than not is manufactured around maintaining the dominant social order. So, challenging that repression embodies a political stance. Also, in working through this critical process, you find yourself identifying with all kinds of alternative histories. More and more it becomes impossible not to take sides. This becomes even more apparent in working on public sites that are historically and politically loaded. I’ve just returned from Derry, Northern Ireland, where I’ve been doing preliminary research for a public project. You can’t stand in the middle in Derry. The territory of the street is literally divided between the Protestants and the Catholics. It’s completely claustrophobic. There is no room for coy gestures. Every street encounter is potentially dangerous. Every pedestrian becomes a reader. If a sign
can't be identified, if there is any ambiguity, it can only represent the territory of the enemy. My piece is pro-Catholic. It will be situated at the interface of the two communities, projecting a set of images back at the dominant Protestant order.

AC: Many of your projects have been commissioned in Europe. What is the difference between working there and in the United States?

DA: In a way, it's more difficult to work in America where everything goes unnoticed because we're constantly being bombarded with information. In America, the whole idea is to catch somebody's attention. Everybody is being killed with text and images, mostly evolving around the idea of the commodity. In Europe, there is a strong sense of history and public places, so it seems easier to intervene. The environment is generally more politicized.

AC: Do you prefer permanent or temporary projects?

DA: I try to stay away from permanent projects. For the most part, my works have been temporarily sited. The "temporary" embodies a political agenda. A temporary work is potentially critical, whereas something permanent usually confirms the status quo. Basically, I'm nomadic. I fear what is etched in stone.

Dennis Adams, Pedestrian Tunnel, 1989, Esslingen, West Germany (one of three). Adams replaced the street signs with two-way light boxes. On the sides facing out, the signs were reissued in a black Fractura typeface on a red ground, a style and color associated with the Nazis. The inward-facing signs were replaced by cropped images of Nazis or their prisoners involved in various kinds of physical activity.
Biography

Dennis Adams was born in 1948 in Des Moines, Iowa. He attended Drake University in Des Moines, where he received his B. F. A. in 1969, and Tyler School of Art, Temple University, in Philadelphia, where he received his M. F. A. in 1971. His work was first shown in 1969 in a group exhibition at the Des Moines Art Center and was first presented in Europe in a group exhibition in Milan in 1977. His first solo exhibition, at the Philadelphia Art Alliance in 1971, has been followed by regular solo shows nationwide, in New York at Artists Space (1979), the Kitchen (1984), Nature Morte (1986), the Alternative Museum (1987), Kent Fine Art (1990), and internationally at Galerie Gabrielle Maubrie, Paris (1988), Galerie Meert Rihoux, Brussels (1989). Among numerous group exhibitions, his work has been seen recently in West Germany at Skulptur Projekte in Münster 1987, in Magiciens de la Terre, Musée National d’Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris (1989), and in Image World: Art and Media Culture, Whitney Museum of American Art (1989). He also has created temporary installations and public works both here and abroad. His awards include Visual Artists Fellowship Grants, National Endowment for the Arts, 1984 and 1988; Manhattan Borough President’s Award for Excellence in the Arts, 1986; DAAD Deutscher Akademischer Ausauschdienst, Berliner Künstlerprogramm, West Berlin, 1989. He lives and works in New York City.
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Dennis Adams WORKS
April 25–July 8, 1990

Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden
Smithsonian Institution