

BROOKLYN RAIL

ArTonic Socrates Sculpture Park By Beryl Gilothwest

"What we do is we bring art to the people. And bringing art to the people has a kind of a joy and liberation that nothing else can equal . . . it's a gift. What happens is that in this society that is so consumer-oriented people don't realize that the gift-giver gets, that the person who gives the gift ends up having something that is beyond the gift."

—Mark di Suvero¹

When I visited Socrates Sculpture Park on a Friday morning in August, the large grassy space on the Astoria waterfront was bustling with activity. Locals walked their dogs, a man sat tapping on his laptop at one of the picnic benches, a woman moved through her exercise routine, and, of course, people perused the artist Mary Mattingly's large-scale installation *Water Clock* (2023), the centerpiece of the park's summer exhibition. Socrates staff, sprinkled among the visitors, soon became obvious. A few of them watered Mattingly's artwork, which is made up of edible vegetation set within a metal armature that echoes the skyscrapers visible across the East River. Another cut the grass while a group of dancers worked on a piece developed in response to the sculpture, which they would perform the following day.



Stephen Callender fabricating Maren Hassinger's *Vessel One* (2022), Socrates Sculpture Park, Long Island City, New York, 2022. © Maren Hassinger. Photo: Joyce S. Chan.

Socrates isn't like any other arts institution in New York City. It has an ad-hoc, relaxed humanism that contrasts sharply with the crisp white galleries and grand museums across the river. It feels like a laboratory for art—a place where creation is as important, if not more important, than presentation. A jumble of repurposed shipping containers greets you upon arrival, mixed and matched with buildings designed by young architects as part of the Folly/Function competition, the park's collaboration with the Architectural League of New York. All of these structures function as workspaces for Socrates artists and grounds staff or are used for educational programming. It feels chaotic at first, but then you realize that Socrates reveals a whole process of making and exhibiting outdoor sculpture, which most other institutions keep hidden. "There is always a delightful period when a new exhibition is emerging and one can see the beginnings of activity," wrote artist Kenny Greenberg, "which proceeds to get downright hectic until it finally crescendos on the opening day."²

A locked chain-link fence in the back of the park holds a variety of large-scale construction equipment belonging to Mark di Suvero—the *éminence grise* and founder of Socrates—who happily lends artists whatever they might need. His studio, known as Spacetime C.C., is a short walk north along Vernon Boulevard. Di Suvero was in his late forties and a successful artist known for his monumental abstract sculptures when he came to Queens in 1980. He had been living and working for a few years in Petaluma, California, when both his dealer Richard Bellamy and the curator Henry Geldzahler told him about two colossal, abandoned warehouses with spectacular views of Manhattan that were for sale on the Astoria waterfront. He jumped at the chance to purchase them and began converting the buildings into studio and living space. "I also wanted to make large pieces in New York and show them here right away, without having to send them cross-country," he said in a 1983 interview with *Architectural Digest*. "That's the reason for this place."

From the beginning, di Suvero was dedicated to sharing the fruits of his success with other artists and with his new community in Queens. A few years earlier, he had started the Athena Foundation with Anita Contini, who had co-founded Creative Time in 1974. Di Suvero wrote in the [founder's statement](#) that Athena "is dedicated to the arts for the people." A section of one warehouse was designated for the foundation, which was soon hosting artists and giving them time, space, and resources to make new work.

The founder's statement also specified a long-term goal to "construct a public sculpture space." Di Suvero soon noticed a 4 1/2-acre abandoned lot a couple blocks south of the studio, directly across a small inlet in Hallett's Cove. This parcel of riverside landfill was owned by the city and had been many things, including most recently a marine terminal, but was being used at that time as an illegal dumping ground. "It was completely filled with all kinds of debris, including many abandoned vehicles," remembered Contini. "Mark only saw opportunity, and before long, listening to him talk about a dream, I began to see it too, and so did many of his friends."³ Di Suvero and his nephew Enrico Martignoni, who was running the studio at the time, began creating a proposal to lease the land from the city to create a sculpture park that they dubbed Socrates, a nod to the historically Greek population in Astoria. An [early brochure](#) specified that the park is "dedicated to Socrates in his search for the truth."

The Socrates Sculpture Park that opened on September 28, 1987, focused on the last of those plans, the one that hews most closely to di Suvero's original goal. "We've gone into this vacant lot and we have turned it into a vision of what the productive energy of people could do if they were allowed to work in a way that was creative, that was open, and that was supported in some way," he said at the time.⁴ His team, with the help of more than a hundred hired hands, had spent a year clearing the space and turning it into a suitable environment to create and install works by the sixteen artists in Socrates's inaugural exhibition, including established figures such as di Suvero and Vito Acconci.

Many of the people who helped build the site lived in Astoria Houses, a low-income development not far from Socrates. The local community has remained an integral part of the park, both formally, through well-attended free educational programs, and informally. Astoria native Logan Mattocks has worked there since 2020, when he was part of a summer program called AH-YES that employs local teens at Socrates. Incidentally, his father and uncle, Nelson and Lenny, worked on clearing and building the site back in 1986 when they were kids. When I interviewed her in July at Spacetime, Ivana Mestrovic, di Suvero's longtime studio manager and a Socrates board member, argued that the park is an early example of "creative placemaking." Popularized in 2010 by former NEA chairman Rocco Landesman, this [term](#) refers to the "intentional integration of arts, culture, and community-engaged design strategies into the process of equitable community planning and development.

The early exhibitions were similarly casual, largely structured as a way to showcase the work being done at the park rather than through the lens of a specific curatorial concept. The sculptor and performance artist Maren Hassinger participated in *Sculptors Working*, which opened in the spring of 1988. Last summer, she was invited back for a solo exhibition. "Socrates Park was so different then, kind of the Wild West as opposed to the manicured parkland that it is now," she told me in a phone interview.



Maren Hassinger, *Three Bushes* (1988), in *Sculptors Working*, Socrates Sculpture Park, Long Island City, New York, 1988. Courtesy Socrates Sculpture Park. © Maren Hassinger.

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When making a site-specific work, Hassinger asks herself: "What can I contribute to make this space more like itself rather than to dominate it in some kind of way by putting something foreign in it?" In *Sculptors Working*, the trio of discrete sculptures that make up her work *Three Bushes* (1988) were placed around the park, one by the chain-link fence along the border of the property and two others among the tall grass by the river. Each one was made from an amalgamation of steel cable—a signature material that she uses for its strength and endurance—bound together to create a trunk, from which wavy tendrils shoot off in all directions. In photographs, likely taken during the late fall, the burnt orange of the rusting rope blends seamlessly into the spindly dead grass. "The pieces look kind of wild and crazy because the space wasn't so organized and prettified," she explained. "And then in the current state, which is a beautiful park, that requires doing something else." Hassinger's 2022 exhibition at Socrates, *Steel Bodies*, featured a series of sleek, large-scale, hollow objects outlined with steel rods that the artist placed throughout the park. In contrast to the energetic *Three Bushes*, which echoed into the chaos of early Socrates, her see-through "vessels" framed new perspectives of the park's mature environment for the viewer.