MARK DION'S URBAN WILDLIFE
OBSERVATION UNIT

FIELD GUIDE

TO THE WILDLIFE OF
MADISON SQUARE PARK

A PROJECT OF THE PUBLIC ART FUND

MARK DION'S URBAN WILDLIFE OBSERVATION UNIT

MADISON SQUARE PARK, JULY 11 - OCTOBER 31, 2002

Field Guide

to the Wildlife of Madison Square Park

A PROJECT OF THE PUBLIC ART FUND

NATURE PRESERVES

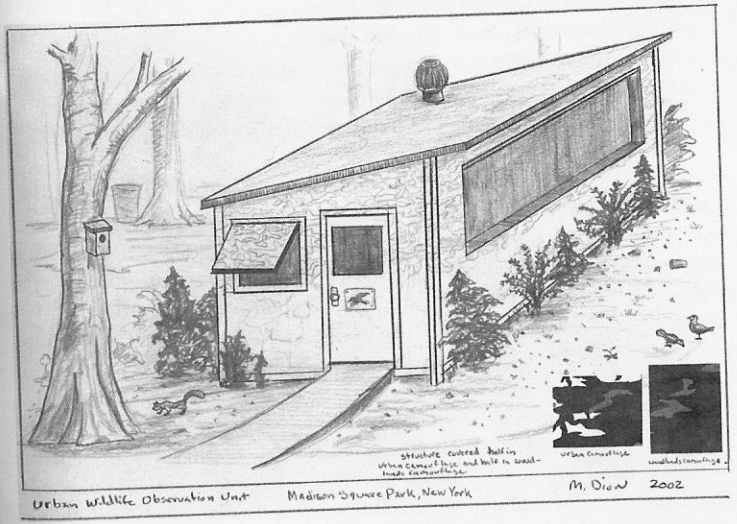
An Introduction to Mark Dion's Urban Wildlife Observation Unit

Mark Dion's intricate and intriguing installations have an astonishing ability to garner our attention. Perhaps it is his choice of materials, the meticulous detail with which each work is constructed, or the humorous undercurrents that he invariably taps into in order to reveal his most serious interest in the way humans choose to order and display the world around them. Dion's projects often begin with an exploration or archaeological activity that results in an artwork that re-presents for the viewer the objects that he finds. In the past he has organized urban digs, dredged rivers and picked the bugs from a dead tree in order to collect, catalog and ultimately present his findings in the context of museums and galleries. It is no surprise, given Dion's fascination with display as an activity, that his work often has the look more of the natural history museum than that of contemporary art.

At the invitation of the Public Art Fund, Dion has created the **Urban Wildlife Observation Unit,** a multifaceted installation (including this guide) that takes Madison Square Park as its focus. Inverting his more common procedure, here Dion asks the viewer to explore the park through the lens of his "observation unit," sited near the southwest entrance. Built in the tradition of a bird watcher's hide, the unit is the second version that Dion has created; the first was shown in the Tijuana River Estuary in southern California. Within its current urban setting, this slightly absurd structure—whose markings cannot possibly camouflage its users from the thousands of passersby—acts as an idiosyncratic orientation to the park, where New York City's natural and urban worlds meet. We hope that the installation and this field guide will quite literally open the visitor's eyes to the richness of Madison Square Park and its many inhabitants who live, grow or walk through here every day.

For the creation of this field guide, we must first thank Mark Dion himself, who so swiftly assembled a terrifically dedicated and accomplished group of writers, artists and researchers for this truly collaborative project. We are indebted to David Rivel, Director of City Parks Foundation, for his introduction to historic Madison Square Park; to Michael Crewdson and Margaret Mittelbach, for their intelligent and lively descriptions of the park's wildlife; to artist Ignacio Lang, for his intricate ink drawings; to photographer Bob Braine, who illustrated the park's present, and Jessica Lin Cox, who delved into the park's past; to Gregory Volk, whose thoughtful essay brings all these elements together and places them within the broader context of Mark's body of work; and finally, to Jorge Colombo, for his sure-footed design of this field guide, perfectly in tune with the delightful combination of earnest research and edgy incongruity that we see in **Urban Wildlife Observation Unit.** —SUSAN K. FREEDMAN & TOM ECCLES

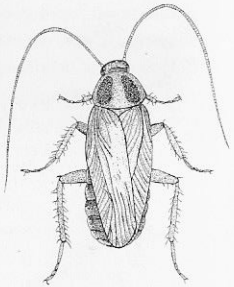
MARK DION URBAN WILDLIFE OBSERVATION UNIT
Concept drawing / Madison Square Park, New York, NY / 2002



A FIELD GUIDE
to the Wildlife of Madison Square Park

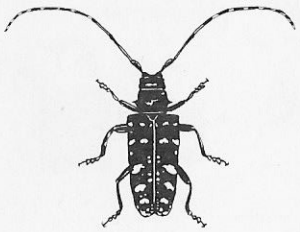
AMERICAN COCKROACH *(Periplaneta americana)*

Length: 2 to 3 inches, with long antennae. Reddish brown. The American cockroach is the largest of four cockroach species that make their homes in New York City. Biologists believe the American cockroach evolved in the African tropics and traveled to North America in the holds of Spanish galleons and slave ships. Though happily transplanted to our climes, it tends to live and breed in environments that mirror its tropical origins: boiler rooms and sewer steam pipes. On hot, humid nights, American cockroaches will emerge to forage and can be seen scuttling along city sidewalks and streets.



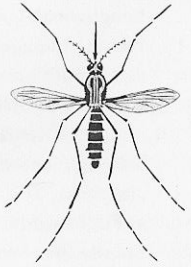
ASIAN LONG-HORNED BEETLE *(Anoplophora glabripennis)*

Length: up to 1 inch. Shiny black body with white spots and long, black-and-white-striped antennae. This creature has not been seen in Madison Square Park—yet. The first U.S. sighting of this invasive beetle occurred in Brooklyn's Greenpoint neighborhood in 1996 after it was accidentally imported from China inside wood-packing material. Since then, it has been killing maple, elm, poplar, and willow trees by rapaciously boring through their trunks. Throughout the city, 3,500 infested trees have been cut down and incinerated. Scientists fear that if this outbreak spreads, it could destroy



North America's hardwood forests. Efforts to eliminate the beetle include injecting trees with the insecticide Imidacloprid, as well as an intensive search for its natural predators in Asia. Anyone seeing one should immediately call the Asian Long-horned Beetle Cooperative Eradication Program at (866) 265-0301.

HOUSE MOSQUITO *(Culex pipiens)*



Length: 1/2 inch. Brown. The food source of female mosquitoes is the blood of birds and mammals, including Homo sapiens, on which they feed by plunging a long, thin proboscis into the skin. Female house mosquitoes are the primary vector for West Nile virus, which emerged for the first time in the United States in New York City in 1999. The virus can cause encephalitis (brain inflammation) and so far has resulted in the deaths of 20 people and thousands of birds. House mosquitoes lay their eggs in pools of stagnant water, including the puddles around water fountains, buckets of water, catch basins, and clogged drainpipes. Adult mosquitoes are most active at dusk, nighttime, and dawn.

MONARCH BUTTERFLY *(Danaus plexippus)*

Length: 4 inches. Bright orange wings lined with black stripes, white spots on wing margins. While these insects may appear fragile as they flit from flower to flower, they are actually among the toughest creatures around.

Each fall, New York City monarchs (along with monarchs from all over the eastern U.S.) fly more than 2,000 miles to reach mountain forests in central Mexico. There, they spend the winter in a state of semi-hibernation. In spring, the surviving butterflies migrate back

to the U.S. to lay their eggs. In Madison Square Park, monarchs seen sipping nectar from flowers at the end of the summer are most likely bulking up for this incredible journey.

RED-TAILED HAWKS *(Buteo jamaicensis)*

Length: males, 18 inches; females: 24 inches. Brown plumage with cinammon-colored tail and whitish breast. These husky, fierce-looking birds of prey are a startling sight in the middle of the city. As of 2002, there were at least eight known nesting pairs in and around city parks. The most famous nest is located at Fifth Avenue and 74th Street on the top-floor ledge of an expensive apartment building. At that unlikely location, these birds have successfully laid eggs and raised chicks for the past eight years. In Madison Square Park, red-tailed hawks are occasionally seen hunting for squirrels.

PIGEON *(Columba livia)*

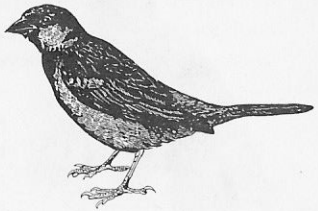
Length: 13 inches from tail to beak. Blue-gray with black bands on wings.

The pigeon, also called the rock dove, is the world's first domesticated bird. Pigeons arrived in this country in the 1600s as farm animals and eventually went wild. But these birds have never completely cut their ties with humans. They nest in our buildings and bridges and survive on our food scraps. Although pigeons are frequently disparaged as "rats with wings," they have many remarkable qualities. Male and female pigeons share in the duties of raising their young, and

both sexes have the ability to feed their offspring with a milky substance produced in their crops. They are also extremely fast fliers, able to reach speeds of 45 miles per hour. And they are navigational geniuses. Pigeons are able to "home" over long distances, and trained pigeons are able to find their way home from distances of over 1,000 miles.

HOUSE SPARROW *(Passer domesticus)*

Length: 5 inches from tail to beak. Streaked brown and black plumage, grayish-white on cheeks and breast, males have black throat. Hopping, chirping, and chattering on the streets of New York City, these small, dusty-looking birds look quite at home here. But like the rest of the city's residents, they have their own unique history. In 1853, a large flock of sparrows was shipped from Liverpool, England, and released in Brooklyn's Green-Wood Cemetery by the Brooklyn Institute (now called the Brooklyn Museum). Sparrow releasing then became a craze, and more of these non-native birds were soon let loose in parks around Manhattan, including Madison Square Park, where an enormous pagoda-like structure was built to serve as their home. Sparrows became such iconic animals that they even became the subject of a short story, "The Sparrows in Madison Square" by O. Henry. In it, the author chronicles a starving writer's unsuccessful attempt to sell a story about sparrows to a newspaper and his growing hatred for the birds: "*'Birds,' I said fiercely. 'The brown-throated songsters caroling songs of hope and cheer to weary man toiling amid the city's dust and din. The little feathered couriers from the meadows and woods chirping sweetly to us of blue skies and flowering fields. The confounded little squint-eyed nuisances yawping like a flock of steam pianos, and stuffing themselves like aldermen with grass seeds and bugs, while a man sits on a bench and goes without his breakfast. Yes, sir, birds! Look at them!'*" [from "The Sparrows in Madison Square" by O. Henry, published posthumously in 1917.]



AMERICAN CROW *(Corvus brachyrhynchos)*

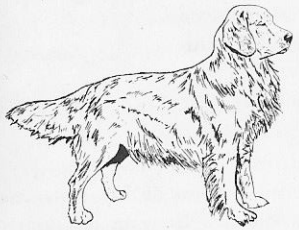
Length: 20 inches from tail to bill. Glossy black plumage. Historically identified with rural areas, crows have dramatically increased their numbers in New York City and other urban areas in recent years. Now among the city's most common birds, crows are of strong interest to biologists due to their intelligence and elaborate social structures. To communicate, crows use different calls to indicate warning, distress, and the need for assembly. Recent research also suggests crows remain together as families longer than most birds. According to Cornell University researcher Kevin McGowan, crows will stay with their parents until age four or five, helping them raise and feed their young. Crows typically live for about 20 years.

EUROPEAN STARLING *(Sturnus vulgaris)*

Length: 7 inches from bill tip to tail. Black iridescent plumage. *"Nay, I'll have a starling shall be taught to speak nothing but 'Mortimer.'"*–William Shakespeare, from *Henry IV.* Eugene Scheifflin, a wealthy Manhattan bird lover and Shakespeare fanatic, made it his lifelong mission to introduce into the United States all of the bird species mentioned in the Bard's works. Toward that goal, he let loose 40 pairs of European starlings in Central Park in 1890. Almost immediately a pair nested under the roof of the American Museum of Natural History, and the descendants of those birds succeeded beyond his wildest dreams. Today there are an estimated 200 million starlings in North America. Though the starlings of New York have never been heard reciting Shakespeare, they can mimic up to 20 different bird species and have been known to imitate barking dogs.

DOMESTIC DOG *(Canis familiaris)*

Height: from 6 inches (Chihuahua) to 34 inches (Irish Wolf hound). Color and texture of fur widely varied. Although there are some stray dogs that roam New York City, most members of the species Canis familiaris are accompanied by humans. It has long been thought that humans "created" these four-legged animals by domesticating wolves about 15,000 years ago. However, recent DNA analysis shows that domestic dogs have existed as a distinct species for at least 100,000 years. There is even a controversial theory that Homo sapiens and dogs evolved together as pack animals, and that much of human behavior was shaped by our interaction with dogs. At Madison Square Park's dog run, humans have installed a special gravel surfacing so that their dog companions will not injure their paws. The dog run is open seven days a week, from 6 a.m. to midnight.



NORWAY RAT *(Rattus norvegicus)*

Length: 18 inches from nose to tip of tail. Brownish-gray fur. Originally confined to Asia and Europe, Norway rats have traveled with human beings to every continent except Antarctica. It is believed rats first came to our shores during the American Revolution on the ships of Hessian troops. They are considered "inquilines," meaning they are animals that have adapted to living with humans. Rats build underground nests in sewers, subway tunnels, sub-basements, and beneath abandoned lots. And they feed on what we eat—from a pizza crust thrown on the street to a bag of rice stored in the pantry of a restaurant. With this survival strategy, rats have successfully made New York their home. There are said to be at least four rats for every human resident of the city. Look for these nocturnal rodents in the evening, making a beeline toward garbage cans.

GRAY SQUIRREL *(Sciurus carolinensis)*

Length: 17 inches from nose to tip of tail. Silvery gray or black fur. Bears, beavers, wolves, and squirrels all once lived in forests that covered the region now known as New York City. But gray squirrels are the only native mammals that weren't killed off or driven away. On the contrary, these bushy-tailed rodents have thrived in city parks, where they build treetop nests out of leaves and dine on acorns and seeds of maple trees. Although extremely cautious in the wild, squirrels in New York have become habituated to people—particularly those who feed them nuts.

LITTLE BROWN BAT *(Myotis lucifugus)*

Wingspan: 6 to 8 inchess. Glossy brown fur. Because of their nocturnal habits, bats elude the notice of most city residents. However, on summer evenings, the city's most abundant bat species, the little brown bat, can be seen swooping around street lamps in Madison Square Park, hunting for insects. Amazingly, one of these bats can consume as many as 1,200 mosquitoes per hour. Myotis lucifugus uses echolocation to "see" in the dark, emitting high-pitched sounds that bounce off objects. Due to the fact that they are most active during the hour after sunset, they are sometimes called "vespers" bats. During the daytime, little brown bats sleep in the crevices of trees or in the masonry of buildings. In winter, they migrate to caves and mines where they hibernate.

LAWN *(Poa pratensis, Festuca rubra, Lolium multiflorum, Lolium perenne)*

Length: 1 to 2 inches. Green blades. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word "lawn" was first used in 1783 to mean "a portion of a garden or pleasure-ground, covered with grass, which is kept closely mown."

Over the years, growing and maintaining such miniature manicured grasslands has become both an art and a science. In Madison Square Park, the lawns are shade-, pest-, and people-tolerant. They are a careful mix of 15 percent Kentucky bluegrass, 35 percent creeping red fescue, 15 percent annual rye, and 35 percent perennial rye. They are also 100 percent "endophyte enhanced," meaning they contain a fungus which makes them resistant to insect infestation. Preserved behind fencing, the park's lawns are reseeded annually.

COMMON DANDELION *(Taraxacum officinale)*

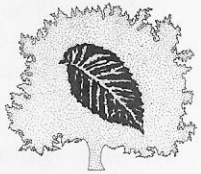
Height: 2 to 18 inches. Low-growing green, toothed leaves; yellow flowers; whitish, globular seed head. Most New Yorkers are charmed by this seemingly innocent yellow flower. But the dandelion is the turf manager's ultimate nightmare. In addition to producing dozens of parachute-like seeds, these flowers can clone themselves asexually, and when one dandelion appears on a lawn, others are sure to follow. For lawn purists, this invasion is unacceptable. If a dandelion's root is not removed, repeatedly cut, or destroyed with pesticides, the dandelion will persistently pop up again. Considered to be one of the world's most "successful" plants, dandelions grow on every continent except Antarctica.

COMMON PLANTAIN *(Plantago major)*

Height: to 18 inches. Low-growing oval leaves, distinctive spike-shaped green flower. Growing on lawns and in sidewalk cracks all over the city, plantain is a weed species that was introduced into North America by Europeans during the early 1700s. It was sometimes called "white man's footprint" because the low-lying

plant spread wherever Europeans settled. Historically, plantain was widely used as a medicinal herb. In the early 1900s, Dr. Finley Ellingwood, an Illinois-based practitioner of "eclectic medicine," prescribed it for syphilis, scrofula, mercury poisoning, female disorders, bedwetting, and hemorrhoids. Today, it is used as an ingredient in laxatives.

ENGLISH ELM *(Ulmus procera)*



Height: up to 80 feet high. Gray furrowed bark with toothed leaf. This tree, which looks similar to the American elm but can be differentiated by its smaller leaves, is one of the first European tree species that was planted in North America. In fact, Madison Square Park's elm specimens date back to the 1700s and are some of the oldest cultivated trees in lower Manhattan. The English elms on both the southern and northern ends of the park are notable for their massive girth and aging, furrowed bark. Strangely, these imported English elms have outlived most of their fellow elms back in England, where Dutch elm disease has almost completely wiped them out.

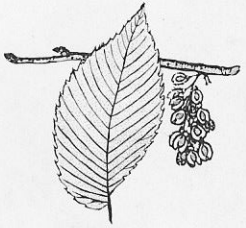
LONDON PLANE TREE *(Platanus x acerifolia)*

Height: up to 70 feet. Tan, green, and gray mottled bark. This tree's massive trunk and its habit of shedding its bark in summer make it easy to recognize. The London plane is a hybrid of the sycamore tree (a North American species) and the Oriental plane (a Eurasian species), but the circumstances of the hybridization remain a botanical mystery. Its ability to withstand pollution, heat, and drought have made it one of the most popular street trees in the world. (It is the most common street tree in London and Brooklyn—and in Madison Square Park). A silhouette of a London plane's five-lobed leaf is the official insignia of the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation.

AILANTHUS TREE *(Ailanthus altissima)*

Height: 50 to 80 feet. Keep your eyes open for this prolific "weed" tree. Native to central China, the tropical-looking ailanthus was first imported in the early 1800s, when it became the city's most popular street tree. However, by the late1800s, the city of New York had banned this tree due to the foul odor of its flowers (thus earning it the nickname "stink ash"). But the ailanthus, which can produce 350,000 seeds per year, wouldn't be stopped. In *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn,* author Betty Smith wrote of the ailanthus: *"No matter where its seed fell, it made a tree which struggled to reach the sky. It grew in boarded up lots and out of neglected rubbish heaps and it was the only tree that grew out of cement."*

AMERICAN ELM *(Ulmus americana)*

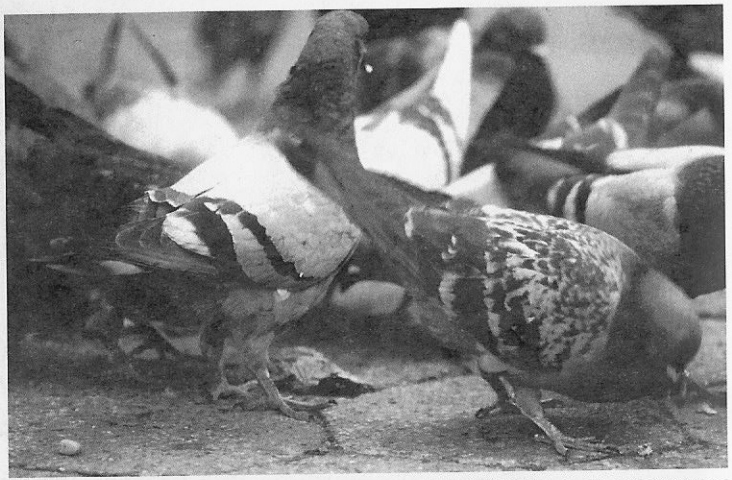


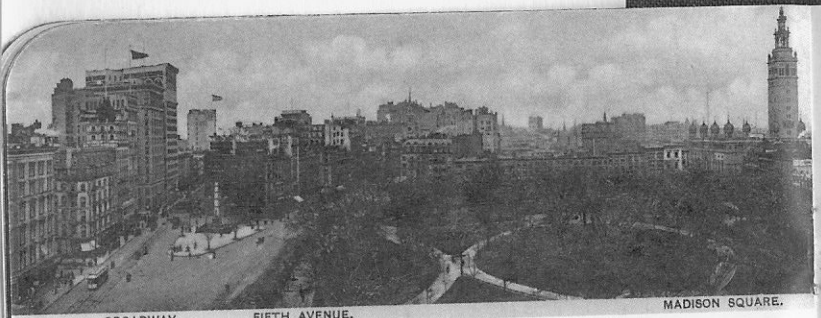
Height: up to 100 feet. Brown, furrowed bark with saw-toothed leaves. These beautiful shade trees once lined the streets of American cities and suburbs. But in the 1930s, a killer fungus that came to be known as Dutch elm disease left most of them dead. Dutch elm disease is believed to have come to this country on European bark beetles that hitchhiked here on wood imported from France. Manhattan, in part because of its island status, has been relatively shielded from the disease. The biggest stands of American elms can be found in Central Park and along Manhattan's Riverside Drive. Madison Square Park has several specimens; the most notable are located in the northeast corner of the park, near Fifth Avenue and 26th Street. In summer, their extensive drooping limbs and dense canopies provide excellent shade. –MICHAEL CREWDSON AND MARGARET MITTELBACH; DRAWINGS BY IGNACIO LANG

FIELD WORK

The plants and animals of Madison Square Park might be considered so common they scarcely warrant a second look. But their mere existence should be a cause for marvel. They have adapted to life in a challenging and dangerous habitat, a six-acre island of dirt, grass, plants, and trees cut off from intensely crowded avenues and streets. And natural histories of the flora and fauna that survive here—the pigeon, the squirrel, the elm tree, and the rat—are fascinating, complicated, and ever-evolving.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BOB BRAINE





MADISON SQUARE PARK

Then and now: Crossroads of NYC

APRIL 27, 1686 Royal governor of New York, Thomas Dongan, designated lands of the new island municipality that had not been sold to individuals as public space. The land described included much of the central area of Manhattan above what we know as 23rd Street (and where Madison Square Park remains). After the area became more settled, this area of New York island was given the name Bloemendal, which translates to "a vale of flowers." This would later give rise to the name Bloomingdale Road (the road that is now Broadway). This area of Manhattan was once a completely pastoral landscape, a valley filled with flowers, streams, lush trees, and small Dutch cottages.

1745–1787 The greater expanse of land in this area exchanged ownership several times throughout this period, but the land remained rocky, swampy, and briery. Farmers had little use for it, so it remained minimally settled prior to 1786. In 1780, the city reacquired many acres of the land in the area surrounding Madison Square Park, which, by 1784, officials on the Common Council divided into lots after noting some public interest in leasing the land.

1807 The city planning commissioners left open a triangular piece of land at the junction of Boston Post and Bloomingdale roads and ceded it to the United States government for an arsenal, which was later used during the War of 1812. The arsenal was contained within a public green-space officially delineated by the initial 1807 plans for the Manhattan grid system. The perimeter of the area was called the Parade and was what we now know as 23rd and 34th streets from south to north and Third and Seventh avenues from east to west. The Parade also bore the remains of a potter's field, established there as a burial ground for victims of a yellow fever outbreak (though the field was closed in 1797 and moved to Washington Square).

Named for our country's fourth president, James Madison, Madison Square Park has been many things to New York City over the years, including a potter's field, a military parade ground, a baseball field, and a home for wayward boys. On May 10, 1847, the park was officially designated a public space. Twenty-three years later, it was redesigned by William Grant and Ignatz Anton Pilat, the Department of Public Parks chief landscape architect and the onetime assistant to Frederick Law Olmsted (who, with Calvert Vaux, designed New York's Central, Prospect, Riverside and Morningside Parks).

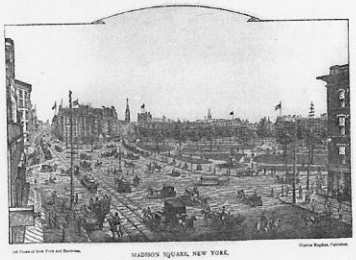
Madison Square Park became the epicenter of culture, art, and entertainment at the turn of the 19th century. Prominent neighborhood residents, such as Theodore Roosevelt and Edith Wharton, strolled the park's pathways, while architectural wonders, like the luxurious Fifth Avenue Hotel (1859), P. T. Barnum's Hippodrome (1873), and the first and second structures called Madison Square Garden (1879, 1890) lined its perimeters. It is said that the true home to baseball is Madison Square Park—where a club called the New York Knickerbockers played the first set of baseball rules, codified by Alexander Cartwright in 1845.

While the park thrived in the early 1900s, it fell into need of repair during the latter part of the century. The Campaign for the New Madison Square Park was created in 1999 to ignite the park's revitalization. Led by the City Parks Foundation, with the support of the City of New York/Parks & Recreation, this $12 million initiative has met with tremendous success, thanks to the corporations, individuals, and city agencies who support it.

Through funds contributed by the public and private sectors, Madison Square Park recently underwent an extensive renovation. Since its official reopening in June of 2001, parkgoers have been enjoying a rejuvenated green space that offers lush lawns, vibrant plantings, flowering trees, a restored 19th-century fountain, and World's Fair–style benches. To secure the park's promising future, campaign supporters have been working on an ongoing maintenance plan and on free programming for all ages.

With the continued support of its city and neighbors, Madison Square Park will be a place of respite and enjoyment for many years to come. The splendor for which this historic space was once known, coupled with its latter-day renaissance, will be an inspiration for what urban spaces everywhere can achieve. — DAVID RIVEL / EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CITY PARKS FOUNDATION

Opposite page: Madison Square Park seen from Fifth Avenue.
Below: Drawing of Madison Square, NY



1809 A supplementary act was passed authorizing the removal of trees and other obstructions for the team of surveyors who worked under the commissioners designing the street system; the act allowed for compensation to the land owners.

James Madison (1751-1836)

1811 The plans for Manhattan's grid street-system were officially unveiled after four years of city planning. "It appears proper, nevertheless, to select and set apart on an elevated position a space sufficient for a large reservoir when it shall be found needful to furnish the city... with a copious supply of pure and wholesome water. In the meantime, and indeed afterwards, the same space may be consecrated to the purposes of science when the public spirit shall dictate the building of an observatory. It did not appear proper, only it was felt to be indispensable, that a much larger space should be set aside for military exercise, as also to assemble, in the case of need, the force destined to defend the city. The question, therefore, was not and could not be whether there should be a grand parade but where it should be placed and what should be its size; and here, again, it is to be lamented that in this late day the parade could not be brought further south and made larger than it is without incurring a frightful expense" *(From the Commissioner's Plan of 1811).*

1814 As the city was again replanned, the Parade grounds were reduced in size to 89.1 acres and renamed Madison Square, marking the tenure of American President James Madison.

1825 After threats of foreign invasions had passed after the War of 1812, the Arsenal became the House of Refuge, designed for the care and reformation of juvenile offenders.

1839 The House of Refuge was destroyed in a fire that broke out in a nearby factory. Later that year, the Boston Post Road was closed as city plans advanced.

1844 James Harper of publishing fame became the mayor of New York City and appointed commissioners to acquire the land forming the square as we know it today.

1845 Gramercy Park developer Samuel B. Ruggles petitioned the city to complete Madison Square Park. It was at this time that the park was reduced to its current size of three city blocks and the land was acquired officially by the Parks Department.

MAY 10, 1847 Opening of Madison Square Park

1870 Ignatz Anton Pilat and William Grant designed the present look of Madison Square Park. His design gave Madison Square Park a Victorian informality, with softer lines to contrast the rigid grid of the city.

1876 The Statue of Liberty's torch was placed in Madison Square Park to raise money for the statue's pedestal.

1912 Madison Square Park was home to the first community Christmas tree.

1935 The New York Herald Tribune proposed a drastic redesign of Madison Square Park that was never implemented.

1963 City planning officials proposed a parking garage under Madison Square Park that fortunately never made it past the planning stage. Such a garage, intended to enhance the value of the park, would have posed a serious threat to the park's oldest trees.

1979 A major effort was undertaken to clean the park and attempt to eliminate a recent history of criminal activity in the area.

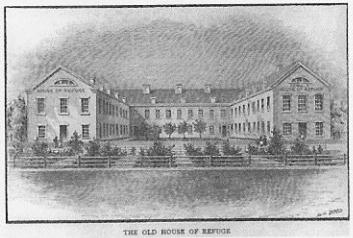
1986 Ground was broken for a total restoration of Madison Square Park to be completed in two phases. The first phase, the restoration of the north end of the park, was completed in 1988 at a cost of $1.7 million. New paths were installed and care was taken to preserve the trees in the area. However, the second phase, for the southern half of the park, was never started, and the park remained only half restored for nearly eleven years.

1997 Another plan was submitted to restore the southern end of the park and to maintain the more finished northern end. The aim was to revamp the park's infrastructure with a budget of $5 million in both public and private funds. The project included a restored dog run, a playground, and a reflecting pool at the northern end of the park.

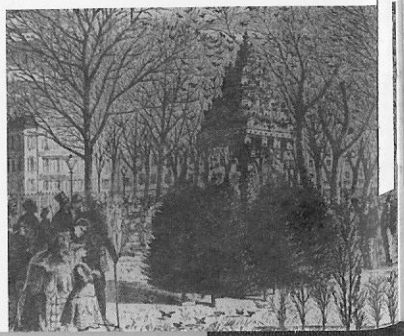
1999 Ground was broken in November and work commenced on the new restoration project. The southeast corner of the park was "squared-off," reclaiming approximately 1,200 square feet of park space. Plantings of perennials, annuals and shrubbery were arranged for the park, creating a more varied and beautiful "green lung" for the city.

2001 The restoration was completed in the spring, and the park was returned to its past grandeur, with Pilat's original design made available to a new generation.

Left: The old House of Refuge, Madison Avenue and 23rd Street. Right: The Municipal Bird House for English house sparrows, circa 1859

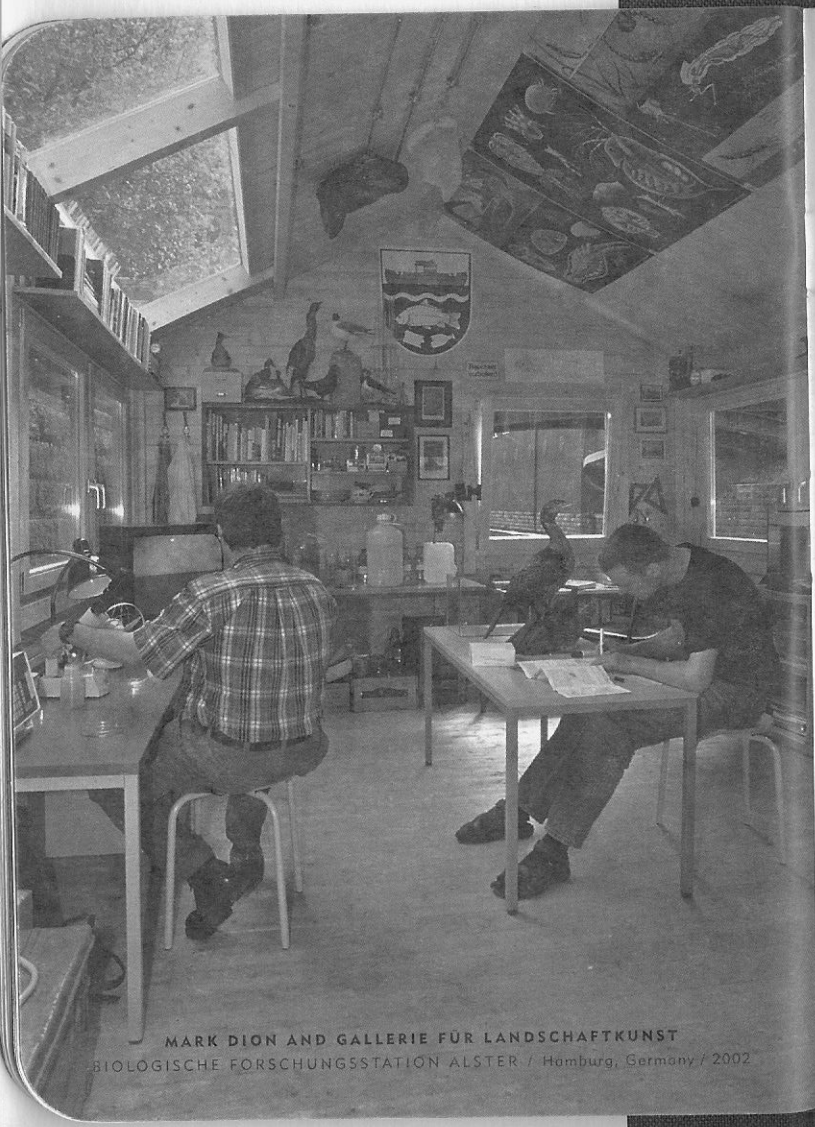


THE OLD HOUSE OF REFUGE



The Flatiron Building, built in 1902

Top: A crowd in Madison Square Park listens to a broadcast of a speech delivered by President Harding at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier (1902) in 1921. Bottom: View of the Metropolitan Life Tower (1909)



MARK DION AND GALLERIE FÜR LANDSCHAFTKUNST
BIOLOGISCHE FORSCHUNGSSTATION ALSTER / Hamburg, Germany / 2002

FOLLY WITH A TWIST

Mark Dion in Madison Square Park

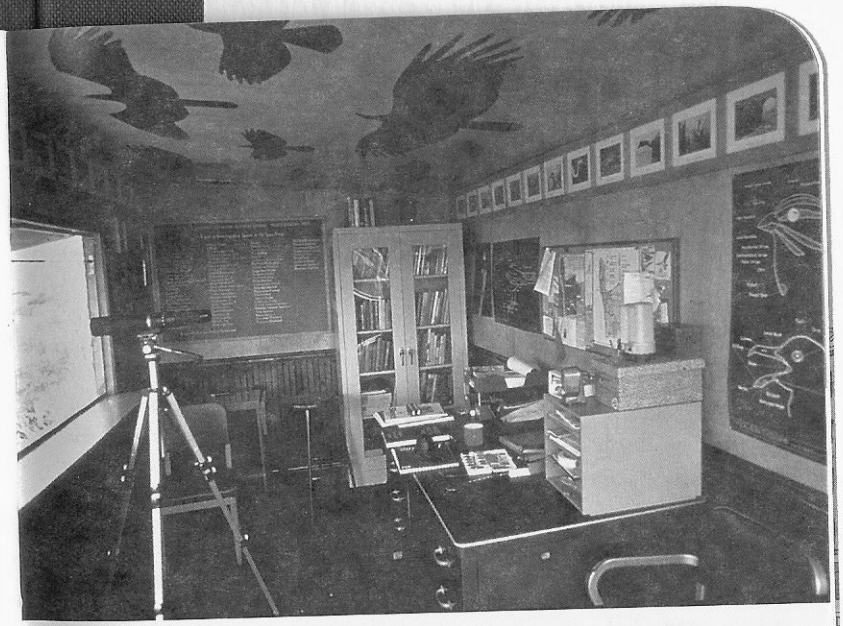
For a cutting-edge contemporary artist exploring the conflicted borders between nature and culture in this era, Mark Dion has consistently revealed an unusual proclivity for 19th- and even 18th-century influences. Several of Dion's acclaimed quasi-archaeological projects, in which he ventures to specific sites to excavate and eventually display a reeling mix of cultural debris, come with a sense of quest and wonderment that recalls past explorations—when intrepid voyagers set out for exotic locales in the hopes of gaining knowledge and acquiring treasures. Moreover, the quirky categories and display techniques that Dion uses—resulting from his kind of personal, or homemade, archaeology—refer to a time when science was young, while generating a dialogue between present and past discourses or modes of apprehension. When you see Dion's exhibitions of found objects you're as apt to think of wildly eclectic 18th-century "cabinets of curiosity" as you are of more focused contemporary museum displays.

As he's pursued such projects, Dion has also pursued a different (yet related) series of works involving architectural constructions in specific nature sites, although, to date, always sites which are anything but "pure" nature, and Dion would be the first to contest any residual notions of purity that we might ascribe to nature. Works in this vein include a bird-observation station in southern California coastal wetlands near the Mexican border, a combination hunter's cabin and biological field station in Germany, and, now, an **Urban Wildlife Observation Unit** in New York City, among others. Depending on the project, these architectural structures double as sculptures, learning centers, libraries, and ad hoc museums, while they also reference both historical and contemporary attitudes toward nature, especially the various ways that nature is categorized, quantified, manipulated, explained, and subjected to shifting ideologies. While eminently practical, these structures contain eccentric surprises, which

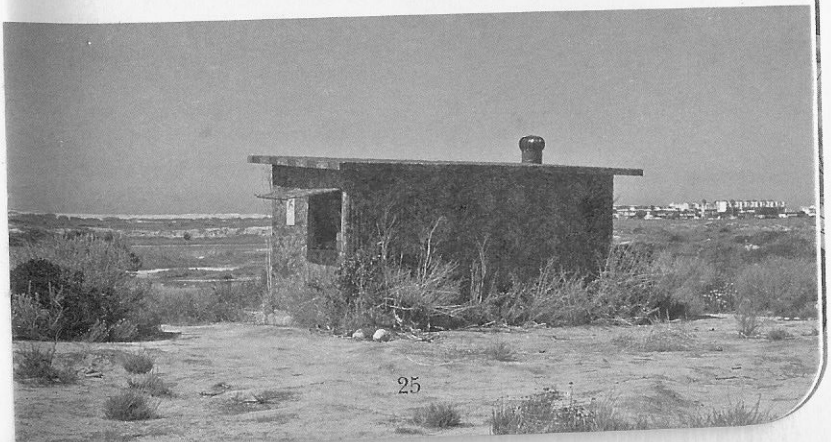
gives them a kind of wild-card status: they make perfect sense, while they also shade into novelty, absurdity, and spectacle.

Dion's California birding unit, for instance, was perfect for watching, chronicling, and researching the 370 documented species that make their homes in the Tijuana River Estuary, which is renowned for its rich bird life. It was also perfect for observing the myriad human forces that impact on this area and its beleaguered birds, including the comings and goings of U.S. border police searching for illegal immigrants and drug smugglers, the constant sonic barrage of military helicopters patrolling overhead, and the encroachment of suburban sprawl. Designed to blend in with the landscape, thereby rendering it an effective and unobtrusive birding station, Dion's structure also sported on its exterior the colors and patterns of the agencies and military branches that are so present in the area, giving it the dire look of a wartime bunker or surveillance outpost, while its interior remained eminently comfortable and convenient. Thus, the benign activity of birding also took on ominous connotations, while the whole project became an evocative enterprise, at once responding to and clarifying the tremendous array of forces impacting on the nature preserve.

As with this project, Mark Dion's **Urban Wildlife Observation Unit** in New York has its own potent mix of serious investigation and gleeful absurdity. The whole premise of Dion's project is coolly outlandish. He has devised a wildlife research station for Madison Square Park, an ultra-circumscribed slice of "nature" in one of the most humanly congested, built-up cities the world has ever known, especially a site from which most native wildlife was exiled years ago. Of course, there is something ridiculous about observing and researching such ubiquitous urban creatures as pigeons, songbirds, and squirrels, but then again Dion also questions just how we assign value in nature, naming one species as amazing, another as banal. Moreover, when one considers that such an observation unit would normally be found in, say, Yosemite and not a New York City park where one goes to walk the dog, sit on a bench in the sun, play with the kids, or merely get from here to there, it begins to seem like sheer folly. This, too, is notable, because another of Dion's historical influences is the architectural folly, which enjoyed something of a heyday in the 18th



MARK DION BLIND / HIDE: THE MOBILE BIRDING UNIT
Tijuana River Estuary, San Diego, California / 2000

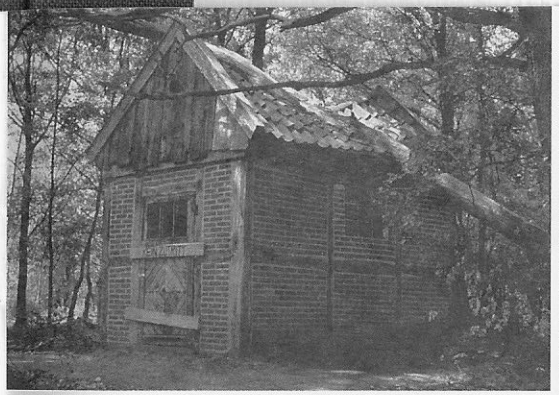


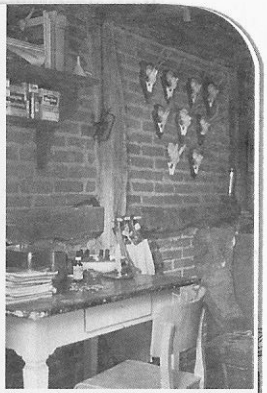
century and to a lesser extent the 19th century, but which still continues now.

In a nutshell, such follies are oddball architectural works so eccentric, rule-breaking, and obsessive that they inhabit their own weird terrain on the far, far outskirts of what is considered permissible and acceptable. Among some of the more notorious and endearing examples are "The Pineapple," in Dunmore, Scotland (an 18th-century house whose roof soars into a 50-foot-high stone pineapple, which is visible for miles), and "The House in the Clouds," in Thorpeness, England, where a fully habitable house, built several meters above the ground, conceals a water tank. In addition to their central wackiness, what all follies share is a tendency to push personal vision, obsession, and quirky logic to a nutty extreme, with the result being a building or structure that doesn't so much house meaning (as, say, a library houses books and research or a skyscraper houses offices and companies) as it becomes meaning, or projects its own unusual meaning to the world at large.

And that's precisely what Mark Dion's **Urban Wildlife Observation Unit** does in its unlikely setting smack dab in the middle of New York, where it demarcates and embodies the border between human life, and plant and animal life in a city where one normally pays next to no attention to wildlife at all. Based on a 19th-century model for such structures, it's grounded in both the history and vernac-

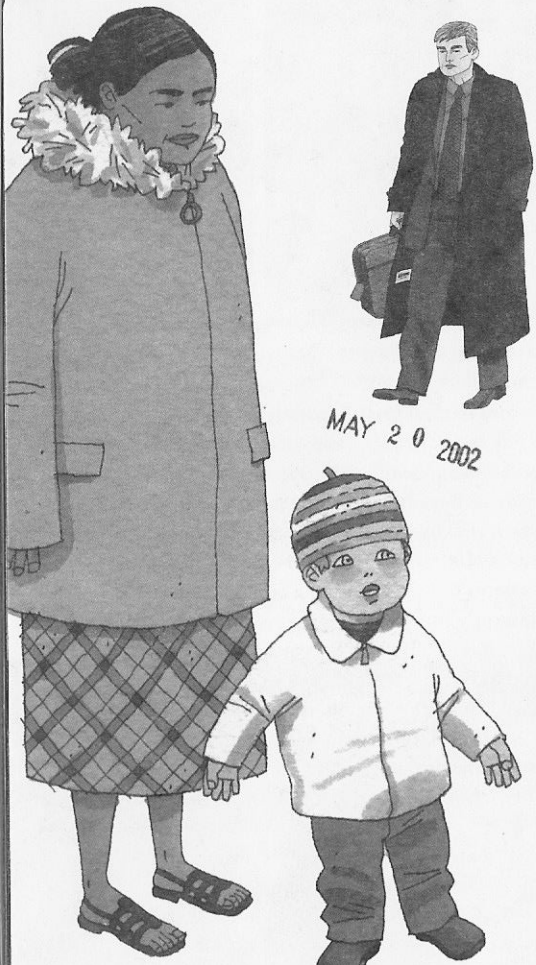
MARK DION AND GALLERIE FÜR LANDSCHAFTKUNST
BIOLOGISCHE FORSCHUNGSSTATION ALSTER / Hamburg, Germany / 2002





MARK DION JAGDHÜTTE (HUNTER'S CABIN)
Nordhorn, Germany / 2000

ular of parks management and natural history investigation. However, its presence in such a small park, which is hardly known for its wildlife, is frankly ridiculous and frankly hilarious, even to outsized, folly proportions. Call this art project a latter-day folly, but one with a provocative twist, for it persuades us to question our relationship with the environment, to question what exactly the environment is in intensely hybrid circumstances, and ultimately to question where we fit in as well, not merely as city residents but as sharers of a complex biosphere where every living thing is competing for space and struggling to flourish in its niche. With true folly-obsessiveness, Dion has also pushed his construction to the extreme, not only in its hyper-detailed look but also its full range of activities, comprising lectures, displays, research tools, pictorial exhibits, and geological, botanical, and historical inquiry. When you add it all up, Dion's project will concentrate attention as it has never been concentrated before on Madison Square Park, even to the point where this slip of land becomes a kind of world microcosm. If education happens out of this, so much the better. If a logic-rattling delight happens as well, that's all for the good. Part clear-headed research and part absurdist-tinged antics, Dion's urban "folly" ultimately has an extremely large scope, namely that of facilitating a cathartic reappraisal of core-level orientations, such as those between city and nature, human and animal, self and world. —GREGORY VOLK



MAY 2 0 2002

FOOT TRAFFIC

Madison Square Park sits at the center of the Flatiron District, a commercial neighborhood where myriad graphic design firms, restaurants and insurance companies now share space with upscale apartment buildings. The area, which once marked the northern end of the "Ladies Mile" shopping district, is now the tip of Silicon Alley, thanks to the area's concentration of tech businesses. In the park, nannies from the adjacent neighborhood of Gramercy push children in strollers, business people sit on benches eating lunch, as messengers, joggers and dog walkers pass by.

DRAWINGS BY
JORGE COLOMBO

MAY 2 0 2002

Lunchtime Talks

WEDNESDAYS AT 12:30 AT THE URBAN WILDLIFE OBSERVATION UNIT
SOUTHERN END OF MADISON SQUARE PARK
23RD STREET AND BROADWAY

JULY 17, 2002

MICHAEL CREWDSON AND MARGARET MITTELBACH Crewdson and Mittelbach are co-authors of *Wild New York: A Guide to the Wildlife, Wild Places, and Natural Phenomena of New York City*, which describes the flora, fauna, geographical features, and ecosystems of New York City.

JULY 24, 2002

ALEXIS ROCKMAN An artist whose meticulous paintings address the tenuous relationship between people and nature, Rockman focuses in particular on the consequences of biotechnology, pollution, and human folly on the environment.

JULY 31, 2002

ROBERT DeCANDIDO A former city parks ranger, DeCandido is currently the vice president of the New York City Linnean Society. He was one of the driving forces behind the release of screech owls in Central Park.

AUGUST 7, 2002

DAVID BURG Burg is the founder and president of WildMetro, a new environmental group devoted to protecting nature in urban places.

AUGUST 14, 2002

BOB BRAINE Based in Brooklyn, Braine uses photography and other media to explore the relationship between humans and the earth, water, plants, and animals around them.

AUGUST 21, 2002

LINDA OLLE Olle's research considers the city pigeon, paying particular attention to the bird's "sexual indistinguishability," wherein a pigeon cannot tell a male from a female and is as likely to mate with its own sex as it is with the opposite sex.

AUGUST 28, 2002

STEVEN CLEMANTS Clemants is director of the Metropolitan Flora Project based at the Brooklyn Botanical Garden, a project to identify every plant that grows within a 50-square-mile radius of Times Square.

SEPTEMBER 4, 2002

DON RIEPE Riepe works with Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge, the nation's first urban wildlife preserve. Its 9,155 acres of diverse habitats are all located within the limits of New York City.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Berger, John. ABOUT LOOKING: WHY LOOK AT ANIMALS. New York: Pantheon, 1980

Berman, Miriam. MADISON SQUARE: THE PARK AND ITS CELEBRATED LANDMARKS. Salt Lake City: Gibbs-Smith Publisher, 2001

Boyle, Robert. THE HUDSON RIVER: A NATURAL AND UNNATURAL HISTORY. New York: W.W. Norton, 1979

Crosby, Alfred. ECOLOGICAL IMPERIALISM: THE BIOLOGICAL EXPANSION OF EUROPE, 900-1900. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986

Ehrlich, Anne and Paul. EXTINCTION: THE CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF THE DISAPPEARANCE OF SPECIES. New York: Ballantine Books Inc., 1981

Fowle, Marcia T. and Kerlinger, Paul. THE NEW YORK CITY AUDUBON SOCIETY GUIDE TO FINDING BIRDS IN THE METROPOLITAN AREA. New York: Cornell University Press, 2001

Gill, Don and Bonnett, Penelope. NATURE IN THE URBAN LANDSCAPE: A STUDY OF CITY ECOSYSTEMS. Baltimore: York Press, 1973

Golding, Charles. RATS: THE NEW PLAGUE. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1990

Hendrickson, Robert. MORE CUNNING THAN MAN: A SOCIAL HISTORY OF RATS AND MEN. New York: Dorset Press, 1983

Herrick, C. Judson. BRAINS OF RATS AND MEN: A SURVEY OF THE ORIGIN AND BIOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CEREBRAL CORTEX. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1926

Kieran, John. NATURAL HISTORY OF NEW YORK CITY. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959

Knutson, Roger M. FURTIVE FAUNA: A FIELD GUIDE TO THE CREATURES WHO LIVE ON YOU. New York: Penguin Books, 1992

Lamb, Robert. WORLD WITHOUT TREES: DUTCH ELM DISEASE AND OTHER HUMAN ERRORS. London: Wildwood House, 1979

Landry, Sarah B. Peterson FIRST GUIDES: URBAN WILDLIFE. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1994

Laycock, George. THE ALIEN ANIMALS: THE STORY OF IMPORTED WILDLIFE. New York: Ballantine Books Inc., 1966

McLoughlin, John C. THE ANIMALS AMONG US: WILDLIFE IN THE CITY. New York: Viking Press, 1978

Mittlebach, Margaret and Crewdson, Michael. WILD NEW YORK. New York: Crown, 1997

Peterson, Roger Tory. A FIELD GUIDE TO EASTERN BIRDS. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1980

Quammen, David. THE SONG OF THE DODO: ISLAND BIOGEOGRAPHY IN AN AGE OF EXTINCTION. New York: Charles Scribner & Sons, 1996

Quinn, John R. WILDLIFE SURVIVORS: THE FLORA AND FAUNA OF TOMORROW. Blue Ridge Summit: Tab Books, 1994

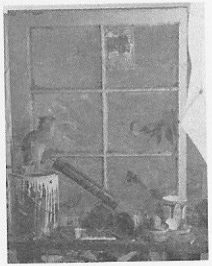
Rivito, Harriet. THE ANIMAL ESTATE: THE ENGLISH AND OTHER CREATURES IN THE VICTORIAN AGE. London: Harvard University Press, 1987

Roots, Clive. ANIMAL INVADERS. New York: Universe Books, 1976

Street, Philip. ANIMAL PARTNERS AND PARASITES. New York: Taplinger Publishing Co., 1975

Waldman, John. HEARTBEATS IN THE MUCK: A DRAMATIC LOOK AT THE HISTORY, SEA LIFE AND ENVIRONMENT OF NEW YORK HARBOR. New York: Lyons, 2000

Zinsser, Han. RATS, LICE AND HISTORY. Boston: Little, Brown, 1963



BOB BRAINE / MARK DION / ALEXIS ROCKMAN
CONCRETE JUNGLE II, 1995

Mark Dion's Urban Wildlife Observation Unit has been commissioned by the Public Art Fund through the Target Art in the Park program at Madison Square Park. Our thanks first and foremost to Target Stores, whose generous sponsorship has also supported the creation of major new works by Tony Oursler, Teresita Fernandez, Navin Rawanchaikul, Tobias Rehberger, Dan Graham and Dalziel + Scullion. This three-year program of contemporary art has benefited from the leadership and vision of Parks Commissioner Adrian Benepe, who initiated the project in 2000 when he served as Manhattan Borough Commissioner of Parks & Recreation. With the City Parks Foundation—under current director David Rivel and former director Debbie Landau, and always with the energy and enthusiasm of Amy Laubach—this collaboration has been supported by the Madison Square Park Art Committee under the leadership of Danny Meyer and Roxanne Frank. In the park itself we must recognize the great and willing help of the park manager, John Herrold, who has been instrumental in both the exhibition series and the research for this publication. This project is made in association with Socrates Sculpture Park. For the research of the timeline, we are indebted to Miriam Berman, author of **Madison Square: The Park and its Celebrated Landmarks**, and to MetLife. Mark Dion is represented in New York by American Fine Arts, Co. and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery.

Public Art Fund

Susan K. Freedman, *President*

Tom Eccles, *Director*

Malia Simonds, *Administrative Director*
Richard Griggs, *Project Director*
Anne Wehr, *Communications Manager*
Margaret Wray, *Development Coordinator*
Miki García, *Project Coordinator*
Mayuri Amuluru, *Administrative Assistant*

FIELD GUIDE TO THE WILDLIFE OF MADISON SQUARE PARK

Mark Dion, *Editor*
Anne Wehr, *Managing Editor*
Jorge Colombo, *Designer*
Toppan Printing Company America, *Printer*

Inside cover: Alvin Langdon Coburn, *The Octopus*, 1912; courtesy George Eastman House. Page 3: Drawing photographed by Tom Powel Imaging. Pages 18-20: All photographs courtesy Museum of the City of New York, except page 20 top and page 21 bottom left. Pages 22 and 26: Photos by Bob Braine. Pages 25 and 27: Photos by Mark Dion. Page 32: Photo by Bob Braine. Inside back cover: Drawing by Jorge Colombo, previously published in *The Village Voice*. Back cover: *Proposed Plan of Improvements of Madison Park from First Annual Report of the Board of Commissioners of the Department of Public Parks*, 1871, courtesy New York City Parks Photo Archive.

CONTEMPORARY ART IN MADISON SQUARE PARK SPONSORED BY TARGET

City of New York Parks & Recreation

cityparks foundation

MADISON SQUARE PARK

KENYON COLLEGE LIBRARIES
0 0000 0518469 2