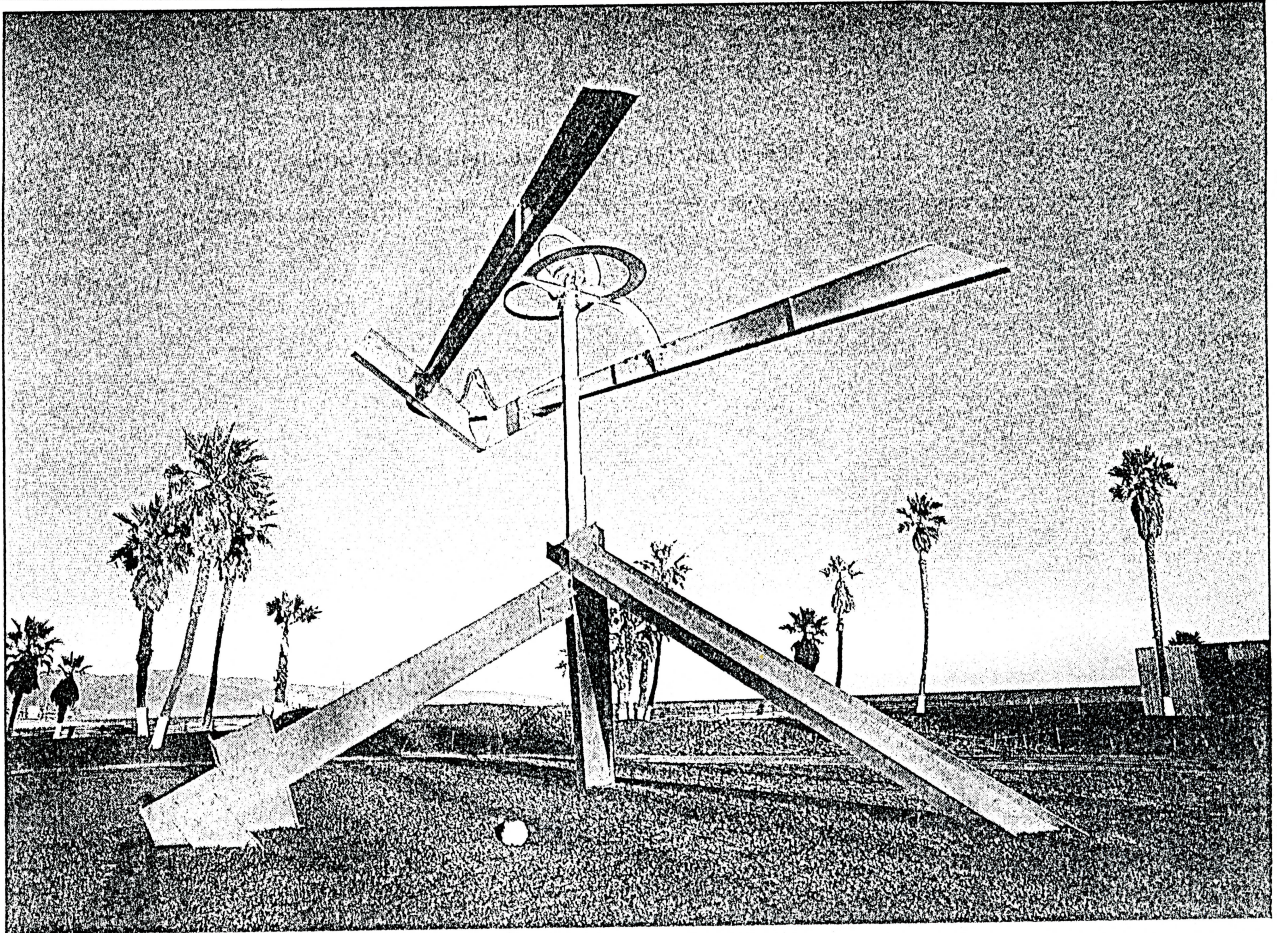


# CALENDAR

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"These sculptures are not so big. They're tiny looked at next to a mountain and the stars," says Mark di Suvero of "For Gerard Manley Hopkins."

## Poetry in Motion

Mark di Suvero's industrial-strength works often are inspired by his literary leanings. His latest creations in Venice honor two poets

By SUZANNE MUCHNIC

The Venice beach crowd had seen it all—chain-saw jugglers, weekend preachers, exhibitionists on roller skates, devotees of the Harmonic Convergence—but they hadn't seen an artist like Mark di Suvero.

When he blew into town early this month to install two massive sculptures at the end of Market Street, he arrived with two flatbed truckloads of steel beams, discs, cables and hardware, a 14½-ton crane and a forklift.

As Di Suvero's team of six geared up for action, he was on—and he was all over the place; high up on a ladder, he grabbed pieces of metal that were delivered overhead by the crane and attached them to the towering, central shaft of steel of the 34 x 36 x 40-foot piece being assembled.

That job accomplished, Di Suvero scrambled down to earth and unleashed cables that secured the bright red sculpture's moving parts while his longtime associate, Lowell McKegney, rode the work's V-shaped horizontal beam like a rodeo cowboy.

A bearded 57-year-old who was dressed in jeans, T-shirt, hard hat and crusty leather gloves, Di Suvero may have looked the part of a construction worker, but he's an exuberant free spirit who recites poetry. His industrial-strength works—essential to any survey of contemporary sculpture—often are inspired by his literary leanings.

The red sculpture in Venice is called "For Gerard Manley Hopkins," in honor of a Victorian poet. The other



ELLEN JASKOL / Los Angeles Times

Di Suvero wearing his hard hat.

piece, "Letter to the World," featuring a rusty mobile top on a vivid yellow base, takes its title from "This Is My Letter to the World" by Emily Dickinson.

Questioned about the meaning of "Hopkins," which moves rather like a giant weather vane, Di Suvero said it was inspired by Hopkins' poem, "The Windhover." When that explanation met a blank expression, he quoted a few lines: "I caught this morning morning's minion, kingdom of a daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding high there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing in his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing, as a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl and gliding reuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding stirred for a bird,—the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!"

Striding around the base of the sculptures with a ratchet-like gait—the result of a near-disastrous accident in 1960 when he was crushed by a runaway freight elevator—Di Suvero then assumed the role of a kindly crossing guard, warning onlookers to stay clear of trucks and machinery that lumbered around the installation site, just west of Ocean Front Walk.

When a breathless jogger ran up to the artist, whipped out a tiny tape recorder and asked what was going on, Di Suvero explained, "It's a sculpture." Satisfied with those three words on tape, the man took off down the beach.

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# Di Suvero

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The crowds ebbed and flowed like the tides during the two-day installation of "For Gerard Manley Hopkins" and "Letter to the World." The public sculpture project, underwritten by L.A. Louver Gallery, will remain in place until Feb. 15. Meanwhile, a show of smaller works by Di Suvero will take place at L.A. Louver's two beachside galleries from Jan. 8 to Feb. 2. Three sculptures will be shown at 77 Market St.; five smaller sculptures, pen-and-ink drawings and computer-generated drawings will be on view at 55 N. Venice Blvd.

"I like Venice. I like the reception here and I love the horizon," Di Suvero said, looking out to sea and reveling in the satisfaction of having completed a difficult installation. About the only annoying aspect of the beachside project was the response of some uptight young people who were obviously relieved to learn that his sculptures are a temporary installation. That, and valet parking. When Di Suvero noticed that L.A. Louver's invitations to a reception for him offered valet parking, he hissed, "It should say 'with the artist's objections.'"

"Mark is an artist for the people,

but he comes from an earlier time," said his buddy, artist Richard Nonas. That "earlier time" was the '60s, now known as an idealistic, pre-yuppie period when art for the people was more in vogue and collectors were more inclined to park their own cars—even at an overcrowded beach.

"My public is the children," Di Suvero said, observing wide-eyed kids who were already sliding down the base of "Letter to the World" while the sculpture's top knot rocked in the breeze. The youngsters reminded him of an experience in Chalon-sur-Saône, a town in central France where he has periodically worked in a shipyard and maintained a houseboat on the Saône River since the 1970s. After having a citywide show of his work in 1972-74, the entire population of Chalon, including children, voted to decide which of his pieces to keep as a permanent installation. "The one they chose was the one closest to the school, the one the children see," Di Suvero said, beaming as he told the story.

Youngsters gravitate to his work for obvious reasons—it often incorporates moving parts and occasionally includes useable swings—but Di Suvero's audience isn't limited to kids. He has won critical acclaim for adapting the heroic, gestural sweep of Abstract

Expressionist painting to sculpture and for incorporating industrial materials and other aspects of everyday life into modernist tradition.

Di Suvero was born in Shanghai, the son of an Italian submarine commander stationed in the Far East. Named Marco Polo di Suvero, he has become something of a wanderer with three homes: New York, Chalon-sur-Saône and Sonoma County, Calif. He exiled himself to Europe in protest against the Vietnam War and became well-known in France, Italy and Germany, but he subsequently returned to the United States and has been an active presence here.

Di Suvero and his parents moved from China to San Francisco when he was 8, and he stayed in the Bay Area through his high school and early college years. He moved to UC Santa Barbara for one year, 1954-55, but returned to Northern California and earned a B.A. in philosophy in 1956 at UC Berkeley. Four years later, while preparing for his first New York show, he was crushed in an elevator accident that could have made him a paraplegic, but he defied the odds and got back on his feet. From the look of his résumé, he has been producing art like crazy ever since.

An energetic man who speaks in gusts of enthusiasm, Di Suvero seems as rugged and good natured as his art, though he is said to be hot-tempered and volatile. Physical feats, mechanical complexities, public encounters—none of it seems to deter the artist who has put his sculpture in public places for nearly 30 years.

Poetry has been an inspiration for his art since the '60s, when he dedicated a work to poet Marianne Moore. "You love what gives you value in the world," he said when pressed to explain how poetry gets his creative juices flowing.

Di Suvero's thoughts run free, and he likes his work to do the

same—especially in public places. He put up temporary installations of his work in all five boroughs of New York in 1975 and he has created a sculpture park from a former garbage dump in Long Island City along the East River. Socrates Park was established in 1986 under the Athena Foundation, which is largely funded by the artist. The park has outlived a five-year lease from New York City, so he now negotiates the lease year by year while developers speculate about building luxury housing there. His success is largely due to problems with toxic waste on the site, he said. "Part of the agreement was that we would not dig."

Di Suvero installs some of his own sculpture in the park, while the foundation provides funds for temporary installations by other artists. Does he choose the art for the park's exhibitions? "No," he groaned. "Can you imagine the phone calls I would get at 2 a.m.? The foundation chooses. All I do is occasionally make a recommendation."

Along with showing sculpture in such unconventional spaces, Di Suvero has had solo exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, the Jardin des Tuileries in Paris and Storm King Art Center in Mountainville, N.Y.

His work also is represented in many museum collections, including here in Los Angeles. The County Museum of Art displays "Teha," a partially painted steel sculpture from 1971, on a sculpture plaza of the Anderson Building overlooking Wilshire Boulevard. The Museum of Contemporary Art's "Pre-Natal Memories," a massive steel piece from 1976-80, is on an outdoor plaza south of the museum on Grand Avenue. Also downtown, near the corner of 5th and Flower streets, a sculpture by Di Suvero is one of five pieces

commissioned in 1980 for the former Wells Fargo bank building under auspices of the City Redevelopment Agency.

The two pieces on Venice beach—along with the gallery shows—compose the first major Los Angeles exhibition of his work in a decade, however, and it was about two years in the making. L.A. Louver Gallery organized the project in cooperation with Richard Bellamy, Di Suvero's longtime dealer at the Oil and Steel Gallery in New York. Peter Goulds, owner of L.A. Louver, needed permission of Los Angeles' Cultural Affairs and Parks and Recreation departments to install sculpture on the beach, so he launched a public-relations campaign and circulated petitions among residents, artists and the business community.

"The artists got behind it. That made me feel good," Di Suvero said.

Permission for the project was granted in September, 1989, for sculpture to be displayed from December through mid-February, 1991. Part of the agreement was that no cost is to be incurred by the city and the park is to be returned to its original condition after the sculpture is removed.

The towering steel artworks sit among palm trees and move in the wind, as if they were custom-made for the location, but they are imports that debuted elsewhere. "Hopkins" has been shown at Socrates Park in New York and "Letter to the World" was created for a citywide exhibition last summer in Valence, France, about 60 miles south of Lyon. When the Venice show is over, the two works will go to Di Suvero's studio in Northern California.

One more show, one more monumental effort. Di Suvero's massive art seems to be an enormous undertaking, but he scoffs at that notion. "These sculptures are not so big. They're tiny looked at next to a mountain and the stars," he said. "The difference is how close you are to them. They are really very small in comparison to everything that's happening in the world."

His sculpture only looks big because vertical distance seems more daunting than horizontal stretches, he said. "You think nothing of driving 100 or 200 miles, but to go up 200 miles, you need NASA. You need a shuttle and millions of dollars."

Still, Di Suvero conceded that his work "requires an extraordinary space", and that "people who don't have a regular way of looking at the world" are most likely to appreciate it.

So far the reception in Venice has been mostly positive. But even if it weren't, Di Suvero would probably wait for the tide to turn. "When I put up sculptures in the five boroughs of New York, people threw bottles at them," he recalled. "But when I came to take them away, they asked, 'Hey, where are you going with our sculpture?'" □

Suzanne Muchnic writes about art for The Times.