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Content, Context, and Controversy

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George Segal's Sculpture on a Theme of Gay Liberation and the Sexual-Political Equivocation of Public Consciousness

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In Memory of Kenneth S. Wein

On May 14, 1979, Commissioner Gordon Davis of the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation received a three-sentence letter from a Peter Putnam of Houma, Louisiana. It was an inquiry to "find out if the City of New York would like to accept a donation of George Segal sculpture for Seridan [sic] Square." Few details were given: "The sculpture would take the form of four white bronze figures seated on two park benches, two men on one bench and two women on the other. The sculptor would assume a minimum installation cost." That was all.

In this letter, written on plain white paper, with a manual typewriter, Putnam identified himself as a trustee of the Mildred Andrews Fund, 3127 East Main Street, Houma, LA. Houma, a bayou town in the Mississippi delta some 40 miles southwest of New Orleans, was not terribly well known as an arts center. Who was Peter Putnam and what was the Mildred Andrews Fund? Why was he willing to donate a George Segal work to the City of New York? And why, with the parks system's 25,000 acres of parkland, did he choose a postage-stamp-sized park for the location? Intrigued, Davis had his director of historic parks, Joseph Bresnan, investigate.

Bresnan wrote Putnam that the "acquisition of a George Segal work" would be most attractive to the city, but that several questions remained: Did the artist have a preference for a park bench? Were the figures properly anchored against overturning and theft? Were security and aesthetic lighting to be considered? Bresnan mentioned that the site Putnam seemed to be

suggesting—Christopher Park—was in "shabby condition" and rather constricted.[1] Had he thought of other sites? Most important, Bresnan asked Putnam to "provide some greater detail on the idea and background of the site suggestion."

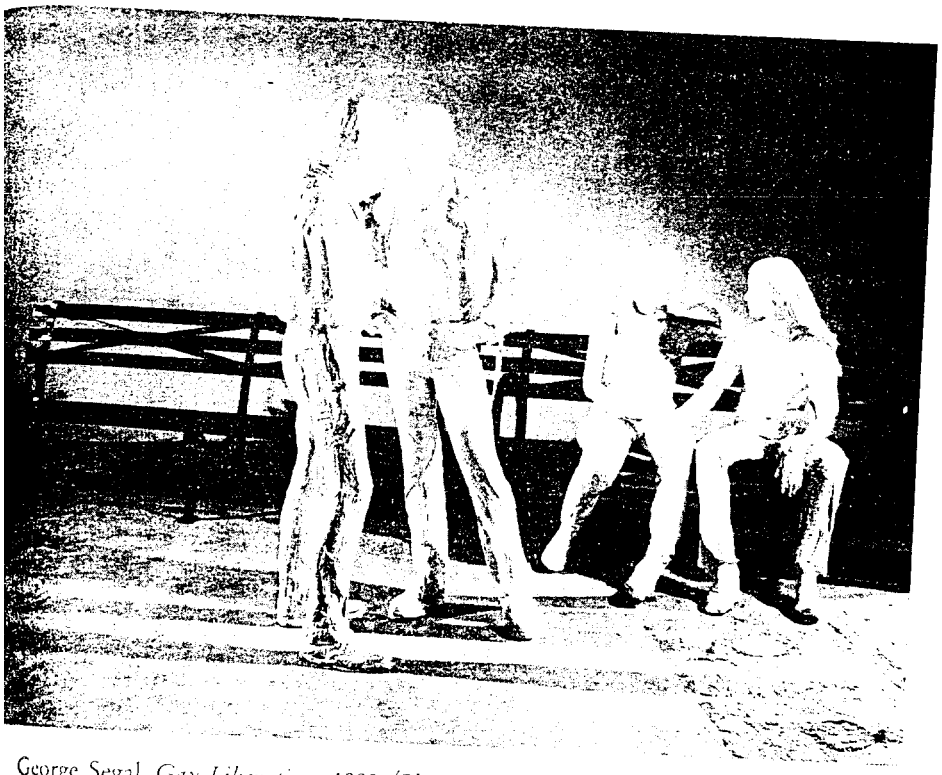
The answers came quickly. Putnam "assumed" that Bresnan "knew the sculpture [was] being commissioned by the National Gay Task Force for donation to the city. Sheridan Square was picked as it was the scene of the Stonewall Riots, in the summer of 1969, which, in the mythology of gay liberation represents a crutial [*sic*] turning point."

Thus began one of the most important and controversial chapters in the annals of public art in recent New York City history. After ten years of public debate, controversy, successful maneuvering through the hurdles of the city's approval process, apathy, and neglect, George Segal's sculpture on the theme of gay liberation has yet to be placed in Christopher Park.

Not a novice in art, politics, or New York, Putnam was not uninformed when he wrote his letter to Davis. As sole trustee of and contributor to the Ohio-based Mildred Andrews Fund, Putnam controlled assets of over $32,000,000. The fund, named for his mother, was known for its support of high-profile, politically liberal causes, including civil rights, the underprivileged, and black artists. Most notably, it had commissioned George Segal's *In Memory of May 4, 1970, Kent State: Abraham and Isaac* to commemorate the students killed by the Ohio National Guard at Kent State University.[2] The fund was also familiar with the New York art world, having underwritten the artwork for Louise Nevelson Plaza in lower Manhattan and Richard Hunt's *Harlem Hybrid* sculpture uptown.

Before writing to Commissioner Davis, Putnam had consulted with Henry Geldzahler, then the city's commissioner of cultural affairs. As a former curator of twentieth-century art at the Metropolitan Museum and the most prominent "acknowledged homosexual" in city government, Geldzahler had expertise, if not sympathies, of importance to Putnam. Undoubtedly Geldzahler had told Putnam to contact Davis, because all public art on city park land was under his jurisdiction. Likewise, Geldzahler, as a courtesy, probably informed Davis of Putnam's proposal. That might explain why Davis's memo to Bresnan asking him to write Putnam was so brief: "Please investigate. I have some interest in it." With good reason Putnam had "assumed" Bresnan knew what the Segal work was about; he already had been in contact with the official New York art world.

Putnam's understated letter to Davis in May 1979 matched the undramatic first public notice of the event for which the Segal work was



George Segal, *Gay Liberation*, 1980. (Photo: © George Segal/VAGA, New York, 1991. Courtesy Sidney Janis Gallery, New York)

commissioned. The *New York Times* of Sunday, June 29, 1969, ran a modest headline in the innermost column of page 33: "4 Policemen Hurt in 'Village' Raid." The newspaper reported a raid by New York police on the Stonewall Inn at 53 Christopher Street (opposite Christopher Park) in the early morning hours of the previous day, for allegedly selling liquor without a license. The article noted that the Stonewall Inn was known for its "homosexual clientele" but refrained from mentioning that it was better known for men who liked to dress up in ladies' clothing. Police raids on gay bars were not new—there had been two others within the last six weeks—but what was new, and now newsworthy, was for the "queens of the night" to fight back. A forty-five-minute melee, with an estimated 400 people, ensued. In addition to four policemen being injured, thirteen people were arrested.

As the *Times* was going to press Sunday morning, a repeat rampage was occurring at the Stonewall Inn. The newspaper reported this second incident in Monday's edition: "Police Again Rout 'Village' Youths." This time, however, the report was not of a police raid–bar brawl but of a specific and angry reaction to police harassment of homosexuals. Within twenty-four hours of the previous night's raid the " 'village' youths" had reassembled, this time covering the windows of the Stonewall with slogans including "support gay rights" and "legalize gay bars." That the symbolic start of the gay rights movement occurred that weekend would not be made explicit until four years later, when, in covering the fourth annual Gay Liberation Day parade, the *Times* wrote of Stonewall as "the beginning of the homosexual rights drive much the same way that the refusal of Rosa Parks to step to the back of the bus is seen as the watershed for the black civil rights movement."[3]

The Stonewall Inn was long closed when Putnam called Bruce Voeller to see if there was any interest in New York in an outdoor artwork to commemorate the gay rights movement. Voeller, a former researcher at Rockefeller University and executive director of the National Gay Task Force, was well connected in national gay politics. As early as May 1977 he and Putnam had discussed a "project celebrating gay liberation." By February 1979 the focus and aims were clearer. Although the type of work or artist was still undetermined, Putnam believed that whatever form the work took it had to be by "a major artist and [located] in Sheridan Square to have impact." His concerns went beyond aesthetic considerations. Putnam felt that the "gay revolution [needed] deeper ideological roots" and suggested the potential of art to "help generate the groundwork for rethinking."

Finding a major artist whose work could spur the "rethinking" would prove less controversial than finding one whose sexual preference was

politically correct. A major artist who was gay, and was known as such, was clearly on Putnam's and Voeller's minds when they approached Louise Nevelson about the commission. Nevelson was a choice not because her sexuality was public knowledge or because she identified herself as being a gay artist but because it was generally known in artistic circles that she was a lesbian. The operative word in such matters was "discretion." Nevelson's sexuality was not going to be promoted, but when challenged it could pass muster. As will be seen shortly, the selection of George Segal—an "unregenerate heterosexual"—would become an issue. Perhaps Nevelson knew this and decided not to get involved. Believing that her life and works were a "testimonial for the cause," Putnam respected and accepted her decision to decline the gay liberation work.

Segal's selection was not surprising. As noted, Putnam had commissioned him for the Kent State memorial, but he had not yet accepted the gay liberation commission when Putnam wrote Davis offering New York the sculpture. Such presumptive anticipation by Putnam was fact, however, when Grace Glueck, writing in the *New York Times* of July 21, 1979, announced that "Ten years after the police raid on a Greenwich Village bar that led to the formation of the homosexual-rights movement, plans are being advanced for a homosexual-liberation monument to be placed in Sheridan Square [*sic*]." Glueck's unequivocal opening paragraph straightforwardly and succinctly thrust the gay liberation monument into the public arena on its own terms. Glueck's candor was matched by official distance. The Parks Department made no comment. Henry Geldzahler was quoted as saying: "The piece should be judged esthetically, not for its subject matter."

Despite a sympathetic and pro–gay rights City Hall administration, getting Segal's sculpture approved was not going to be easy. The best strategy would be to ignore the sculpture's content and promote George Segal's renown, in other words, the "esthetic angle." Geldzahler's plea, ignored by almost everyone else, would characterize the official Parks Department position throughout the long approvals process required for all artworks on city land.

There was no public outcry following the *Times* article. That was probably a result less of political strategy than of the fact that there was no artwork to respond to, no city sponsorship, and the approvals process, including the Art Commission, the Landmarks Preservation Commission, and the local Community Planning Board, was still to come. A politically savvy citizenry knew better than to react to something not yet perceived as real.

Meanwhile Putnam, Voeller, and Segal were moving quickly. At the time of Glueck's article, Segal had not yet refined the concept of the work; by April 1980 plaster casts were complete. The grouping of two couples that Putnam had written to Davis about was now differentiated by the male couple standing and the female couple sitting.

Segal also sent Bresnan an explanatory letter. He wrote that he had visited the neighborhood where the sculpture would be placed and found that "despite its reputation as a gay community [he] noticed many young mothers pushing strollers, school yards, and the usual complex religious and ethnic mix of a New York residential neighborhood." Such observations were significant, yet they posed a potential conflict with portraying the "emerging, out of the closet gay community" the piece was to celebrate. Figurative representation of such a theme had to be dealt with honestly, yet discreetly.

That Segal walked the neighborhood and recorded his observations suggests his awareness of the thorny issues informing his commission. Although Segal was clear in his understanding of the intentions of the work, he said that it was not a "political statement." Rather, his response was a personal one, culled from the "individual experience [he] had with many gay friends." He wrote that he identified with gay people and their struggle, and that he had tried to express the universal, human qualities of "intelligence, delicacy, sensitivity and loyalty so often demonstrated" among gay people he knew. The resulting sculpture, neither flainboyant nor fearful of affectionate, well-placed tactile communication, is quintessential Segal.

With Segal's photos and word that the sculpture casts were complete, the Parks Department began the legally mandated approvals process for public art. The sculpture was thus catapulted into the public arena. Reaction would be swift.

"Sculpture Planned for 'Village' Brings Objections" read the *Times* headline of the August 28, 1980 article breaking, once again, the news of Segal's sculpture. In case anyone missed the boldface, three-column headline, the article was accompanied by a photo of the work—the first published—and a bird's-eye view of Christopher Park, with inset locator map. Additionally, the sculpture now had a name: "Gay Liberation." Unlike the last year, when few seemed to care, now everyone did. Battle lines were drawn for the fight to come at the public hearings scheduled for the fall.

Although community boards are sanctioned by the New York City Charter, their opinions are taken only under advisement and carry no authority. This does not, however, stop them from taking their responsibil-

ity seriously and making their voices heard. Of the city's community boards, few were as well informed, active, organized, factionalized, and boisterous as the Village's Board Two. In a city where few issues arouse the public's passion as much as parks, Board Two was known to turn out 300 angry mothers—with children in tow—to protest the slightest change to their parks. To mix parks, politics, art, and morality in one issue and to open it to public debate, as was required, was to offer an entertainment extravaganza guaranteed not to disappoint.

The first public hearing convened on September 18, 1980. Not even a ten-dollar cover—as some suggested was a fair price for the show—would have thinned the standing-room-only crowd. Village resident Vera Schneider, speaking against the sculpture, dramatically punctuated her impassioned peroration by tossing a 20-foot-long scroll, with over 500 signatures, into the hall. The crowd went wild. At the next month's hearing, Bruce Voeller challenged Schneider with a 3400-name pink petition, which he and supporters unraveled, circling the auditorium.

To the uninitiated, the circus atmosphere of public hearings must appear to be the complete breakdown of public decorum. For the regulars, it is the imprimatur of New York–style democracy in action. Somehow, in the free-for-all filled with desperate calls to order, pleas for quiet, spontaneous applause, jeers, hisses, boos, and denunciations, serious, impassioned, often relevant discourse emerges. In reality public hearings are just what they look like, shows of strength that rarely change anyone's mind. Opinions are set in advance and handed out at the door via leaflets, typed position papers, scribbled notes, buttons, and the like.

No stranger bedfellows hath art, parks, and politics made than those united in opposition to "Gay Liberation." Prime-time middle-American TV-family types, stereotyped radical gay men and lesbians, "respectable" homosexuals of the Mother's unmarried brother type, drag queens, doctors, fundamentalists, cooks, cranks, clergy, an assortment of people defying categorization, and probably others—in general the standard disparate mix that one would expect to find in the Village—made up the opposition.

They were united in opposition only. The more traditional mainstream residents, individually or collectively identified with one of the dozen or so local block associations and civic groups opposed to the sculpture. They argued that Christopher Park, only one-seventh of an acre, was too small to accommodate four life-size figures, and that the white bronze sculpture would be out of character with the nineteenth-century landmark park.

Their less literal reason for opposing the sculpture was that it promoted "special interests." They reiterated that they did not oppose homo-

sexuals, homosexuality, gay rights, gay life-styles, and so forth, but they were opposed to special interest groups forcing on them a sculpture whose purpose was clearly political. They feared that the sculpture would change the tranquil park into a "focal point for sightseers and sensation seekers, demonstrations and confrontations." Astutely, they challenged the sponsor's principal reason for locating "Gay Liberation" in Christopher Park—proximity to the Stonewall Inn—because at least one other casting of the work was being sanctioned for Los Angeles. They made clear that they did not oppose the conception of a "memorial or commemorative." Some noted that Christopher Park by its "very existence can be regarded as a memorial to the culture and historic events" of gay people just as a "wall, a place, a park" can take on a commemorative role.

The protests were, as one observed, "only a smokescreen for more deep-seated objections." Bruce Voeller was more explicit; he called them "homophobic." The Village residents' opposition to "Gay Liberation" was not overt, conscious bias; it was not antigay, it was antidisplay. To the extent that a minority wishes to show itself openly, it is subject to bias. Acceptability is achieved through conformity. In matters of sex, the homosexual embrace is morally subordinate to the heterosexual kiss. A plaque to commemorate Stonewall was acceptable to the community opposition, but a representational artwork called "Gay Liberation" was not.[4] Arguments of special interests were aimed only at the Segal work while hundreds of other special interest artworks in proximity to the park, not to mention Philip "The-only-good-Indian-is-a-dead-Indian" Sheridan in Christopher Park itself, were ignored. Despite protestations to the contrary, and without their recognizing it, the community opposition was covertly harboring sex preference cultural biases that not even their Village residency could purge. They didn't say it, their actions did.

The clergy and morally conservative individuals had no trouble saying it. They denounced and condemned "Gay Liberation." Sodom and Gomorrah-on-Hudson would not be given official sanction. The Council for Community Consciousness warned that the sculpture would "advertise New York as a mecca for homosexuals, who will view the statue . . . as an international shrine." A missionary writing from Nigeria warned of the disgrace that the United States would be subjected to if such a "perversion of God's laws was allowed." Others simply and crudely condemned the "homo sculpture" as pornographic. New York's major newspapers took no editorial stand on the work, but *New World* columnist Larry Moffit hid little of his prejudice: "I cast my vote with the birds, bees and the rest of nature in insisting that homosexuality is a perversion."

The least expected, most secular, and often mordant criticism came from gay people themselves. In general they did not object to the idea of a monument, only to how it was being handled and to the merit of the work itself. They were few in number but vocal enough to give the impression of a rift within the gay community, so much so that some gay leaders took issue with local press implications that a split existed.[5]

Nevertheless, a gay opposition did exist. The Gay Activist Alliance objected to spending $100,000 on art instead of on a legal defense fund or some political cause to help the gay movement, which it felt was moribund. The newly organized group Lesbians and Gay Men Against the Statue found it unacceptable "to have one individual or even a handful of individuals deciding on what will become a very important and enduring symbol for all of us."

Exacerbating the fait accompli complaint was George Segal's heterosexuality. Craig Rodwell, owner and founder of the Oscar Wilde Bookstore, objected that "lesbian and gay artists were given no opportunity to even submit designs or suggestions for [the] statue." Bruce Voeller answered that "to have selected a sculptor because he was gay would [have been] discrimination on the basis of sex."[6]

It is interesting that it was the gay opposition that, in their ability to supersede moral issues, heeded Geldzahler's plea to judge the sculpture as a work of art. Their naively literal criticism betrayed a serious understanding of the importance and power of representational art. Rodwell further objected to the sculpture's Caucasian models. He noted that Melvin Boozer, a black gay man nominated as the vice-presidential candidate of the Gay and Lesbian Caucus at the 1980 Democratic Convention, dispelled the "myth that gay rights is a white movement." Robert Rygor, a gay resident of the Village, found Segal's figures "grotesque stereotypes." (His rebuke was silently rebutted by the four models, who posed for the work by wearing T-shirts imprinted with "Grotesque Stereotype.") Lesbians objected to the sexist stereotypes implied by the "male-active" standing, "female-passive" sitting opposition. Drag queens wanted representation for their role in Stonewall too. The hairsplitting demands for equal representation for subgroups within the minority presented a reductio ad absurdum program that no artist or work could satisfy.

Behind the suspicion and rancor were essential artistic considerations, which, while lost in the clamor of the public debate, were not overlooked by some in the artistic community. James M. Saslow's thorough yet essentially negative analysis of "Gay Liberation" in *Christopher Street* of February 1981 was among the most important and serious discussions of the work.

Saslow situated the work within the broader context of public art, the unique problems of gay Americans, and American society itself.[7]

Saslow had problems with Segal's works in general. He saw Segal as "the poet of isolation, alienation and . . . the lonely crowd." Segal could not adequately celebrate the nature of gay liberation as Saslow deemed it. He felt that Segal's style contradicted the monumental "sense of elevation" required of public sculpture and that the "narrow emotional range of Segal's oeuvre" was insufficient to express the more demonstrative qualities needed to embody an emerging gay movement, one that had to dispel the notions of isolation, alienation, and loneliness.

Saslow was bothered by the unflattering interpretation to which "Gay Liberation" was subject. He felt that the sculpture too directly and acutely tapped into the "lack of a coherent sense of [gay] group identity." What Saslow found distressing was precisely Segal's strength, as Saslow himself observed: "Sad to say, their blank stares, narcissistic isolation, and awkwardly hesitant contact devastatingly reflect the true emotional tensions both within and between the inhabitants of those metropolitan ghettos Segal understands so acutely." And in an honest display of self-examination he added: "All things being equal, I too would have preferred a gay artist—but things are in fact far from equilibrium, and would not any sensitive gay sculptor have recorded the same unease?"[8]

What Saslow found disturbing in "Gay Liberation" was upheld as its major achievement in Fred Licht's eloquent defense of the Segal work. Licht, a former director of the Art Museum of Princeton University, had worked closely with Segal during the period "Gay Liberation" was commissioned. He thought it was "one of the most important" projects worked on at the time. Whereas some saw narcissism in Segal's figures, Licht saw introspection and vulnerability. Whereas some saw a casual pickup on a park bench devoid of intimacy, contact, and trust, Licht saw an "intimate, tender and highly individualized [moment] of human existence." He believed that the strength of Segal's opus, and "Gay Liberation" in particular, was its ability to maintain individual identity in "context with the modern American scene so frequently indifferent to the needs and perplexities of the individual." Rather than portraying the "rebellious beginnings of Gay Liberation," Segal chose to express the "insistence on the right of everyone to realize his profound need to love and be loved, to be loyal to his nature, and to friendships that give meaning and substance to existence." Segal's "Gay Liberation" will endure, Licht concluded, "all the more for having been proclaimed in a sculptural form that expresses the dignity of the cause and that respects the intimacy and sensibility" of the gay community. Whereas

Saslow would have neoclassical heroism, Licht embraced realist human drama.[9]

Community Board Two had more prosaic notions in mind, however, when, on October 16, 1980, bucking the recommendations of its own parks and landmarks subcommittee, it passed a resolution giving tentative approval to the installation of "Gay Liberation" in Christopher Park, with conditions. The board demanded a complete restoration of the park, something they had been asking for since 1976, and the establishment of a $10,000 maintenance fund for the sculpture.[10]

Shortly after Board Two's approval, Andrew Stein, borough president of Manhattan, in accordance with his custom "not to take a stand on a community issue prior to the affected . . . board's decision," concurred with the board's decision. Other elected city officials, including councilmen Antonio Oliveri and Henry Stern, and councilwomen Carol Greitzer and Miriam Friedlander, followed suit. By early spring 1981, Parks Commissioner Davis wrote to Board Two District Manager Rita Lee committing his department to "giving priority to the Christopher Park" renovation as stipulated by the board.

"Believe it or not we think we are ahead of schedule." Director of Historic Parks Joseph Bresnan wasn't kidding when he wrote Putnam in January 1983, informing him that the last of the approvals for the reconstruction of Christopher Park, including the installation of "Gay Liberation," was complete. Construction could start by spring; if all went well, "Gay Liberation" could be installed by January 1985.

But for Putnam things were going disappointingly slowly. He was a nervous and suspicious man, who doubted the city's good-faith efforts. All he saw were unaccountable delays. Twice during 1981 he had threatened to withdraw his offer but was appeased by Geldzahler, whom he apparently still trusted. In February 1982 he had written Bresnan an uncharacteristically long and forceful letter filled with consternation over a process he could not fathom. He clearly believed that there was a possibility that the sculpture would not be installed. In that eventuality, he asked Bresnan to "find some informal way to let [him] know so that the Mildred Andrews Fund [could] pursue other possibilities." In his February letter he added a significant condition to his gift: "the piece must be kept in Sheridan Square Park [*sic*] for twenty years, or else the title reverts to the Mildred Andrews Fund, to protect the interests of the gay community." He reiterated, however, his commitment to the work and restated the ideological importance

of Christopher Park as its location. He noted, prophetically, "It is worth waiting for ten years if need be."

Putnam was having problems with Voeller, too. Their relationship was deteriorating. Putnam, a reclusive man, rarely entered the public eye. In Voeller he had found a dynamic, articulate gay activist who could serve as public advocate for "Gay Liberation." Indeed, it was Voeller who faced reporters and angry constituents. Voeller always felt confident in claiming sponsorship of the Segal work, a claim Putnam seems never to have taken exception to, at least until the end of 1981, at which time the two men were not on speaking terms. In truth, although Voeller was a cosponsor, Putnam always maintained financial control of the work. In virtually everyone's eyes, Putnam, not Voeller, was the custodian of "Gay Liberation."[11]

Christopher Park's reconstruction neared completion in early 1985, and "Gay Liberation" could, at long last, be installed. Putnam was notified, as was City Hall. The last weekend of June would be the preferred dedication date, because it coincided with the Stonewall anniversary. But 1985 was an election year. Although Mayor Koch faced virtually no opposition and was a strong supporter of gay rights, City Hall preferred a date more removed from November. It asked that the sculpture be placed by March. Everything was set, almost.

No one was quite prepared for Putnam's letter to Bresnan of January 17, 1985, reconfirming the Mildred Andrews Fund's gift of "Gay Liberation" but with some new conditions. Putnam reiterated what he had told Bresnan in February 1982, that the "sculpture be kept in Christopher Park for at least the next twenty years" and that if "for any reason the sculpture [could] not be kept there, title shall revert to the Mildred Andrews Fund." In 1982 the conditions had been sidestepped because the sculpture was so far from being installed. Now, with the installation imminent, they could not be. Additionally, Putnam stipulated that if the city "no longer wish[ed] to assume the burden of maintaining the sculpture in good condition for the next twenty years at Christopher Park, then title shall revert to the Mildred Andrews Fund." Upon written acceptance of his conditions, Putnam pledged $10,000 for the maintenance fund that Board Two had mandated.

In establishing his conditions, Putnam was motivated, as he always had been, by a firm commitment to the Segal work. Throughout the years he remained firm in his conviction that "Gay Liberation" must remain in Christopher Park. He never lost sight of the primary purpose of the work: it was political. He knew only too well that the work was at risk of vandalism—a second casting at Stanford University had been so seriously damaged in 1984 that Segal had had to recall the sculpture to repair it.

Putnam feared that the city would allow the work to deteriorate to such an extent that it would become meaningless as public art, or worse, that the city would not provide sufficient guarantees to prevent repeated vandalism and would therefore remove the work. His letter was a deliberate attempt to ensure, as best he could, the ideological and aesthetic integrity of "Gay Liberation."

Although Putnam's motivation was sincere, his conditions would present a severe setback. Much had changed in the intervening years. The same administration occupied City Hall, but Parks Commissioner Davis was gone. Perhaps the most significant change was the evaporation of interest concerning the work. When Christopher Park went into construction and "Gay Liberation" went on the road, everyone seemed to forget about the sculpture. The papers dropped the story; momentum was dead. In such an atmosphere, not fueled by a vocal lobby, a dormant controversial subject was encouraged to sleep.

The new parks commissioner, Henry Stern, would not accept Putnam's conditions. It wasn't that the city didn't make deals. Stern himself, at the very moment he was rejecting Putnam's conditions, was agreeing to similar conditions put on the gift of Henry Moore's *Two-Piece Reclining Figure: Points.* The donors, George and Virginia Ablah, had stipulated that "the sculpture be maintained and preserved up to museum standards for outdoor works, and if for some reason this were not possible, the sculpture would be returned to [them]." Stern, in a letter cosigned by Commissioner of Cultural Affairs Bess Myerson, accepted "the terms as outlined."

It wasn't that Stern was equivocal on gay rights either. He was a cosponsor of the city's gay rights bill and had been one of the city councilmen to endorse "Gay Liberation." Strictly speaking, Stern's objections to Putnam's conditions were mundane and technical. They were real and tangible and convenient. Once installed, "Gay Liberation" was going to be a liability Stern wanted to avoid. Putnam's conditions could be parlayed into further delay.

Matters were not made better by the reemergence of Bruce Voeller, who had not been heard from in almost two years. With Christopher Park nearing completion, Voeller called the Parks Department in March 1985 to check on "Gay Liberation." He was informed that the installation was on hold pending resolution of the latest crisis. Voeller was outraged. He wrote Stern a letter rebuking the Parks Department for accepting Putnam's claim of ownership of the work. Voeller argued that the city already owned the work and thus didn't have to listen to Putnam. He made a veiled threat to sue if the city didn't recognize its own right with regard to the statue.

In the long history of "Gay Liberation," no one had ever questioned

its ownership. Stern, a Harvard-trained lawyer, knew that most people, including those in his department, assumed that Putnam was the legal owner. He also knew that Voeller didn't have the resources to go to court. He knew that bringing in the lawyers was not a shortcut. So he did. "Gay Liberation" was sent to the legal limbo-land of the city's Corporation Council for a determination on who owned the work.

In January 1986 the Corporation Council ruled in favor of the Mildred Andrews Fund as sole owner of "Gay Liberation." Although the ruling was significant, it did not resolve the still extant issues of maintenance and insurance, upon which Putnam and Stern could not agree. The untimely death of Peter Putnam in December 1987 was another blow. With his death the Mildred Andrews Fund would be dissolved, a circumstance that, ironically, was an incentive to resolve the lingering problems facing "Gay Liberation." However, matters were still unresolved when Henry Stern left office in February 1990. By then "Gay Liberation" was virtually forgotten, its constituency dead, gone, or not caring. New York's new mayor, David Dinkins, and new parks commissioner, Betsy Gotbaum, may conclude this story, but in matters of art, parks, and politics we know better than to hold our breaths. After more than a dozen years since Peter Putnam first wrote to Gordon Davis, Christopher Park has yet to receive George Segal's sculpture on a theme of gay liberation.

Postscript

AIDS has changed everything.

When Peter Putnam wrote Gordon Davis in 1979, he could not have known that another "crucial turning point" was about to happen in gay history. AIDS was making its rounds, soon to hit so brutally and virulently that it would test the resources of the gay community to their breaking point. Over the past decade, though deadly, AIDS has not been the mortal blow to the spirit of a new consciousness unleashed with Stonewall. Because no one else would, the gay community had to save itself. In the ongoing struggle, gay people have more than once, and against horrific odds, demonstrated those human qualities of "intelligence, delicacy, sensitivity and loyalty" that George Segal found so admirable in them. Nothing in gay life is the same in the era of AIDS, not even a monument to gay liberation. Art under siege by a tiny virus transfigures into a memorial.

ED. NOTE: After delays of more than a decade, George Segal's *Gay Liberation* was installed June 23, 1992 in Christopher Park, Greenwich Village, New York City.

All quotations are from documents on file at the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, unless otherwise indicated.

1. There is a long history of confusion concerning Christopher Park and Sheridan Square. Christopher Park is a city park bounded by Grove, West Fourth, and Christopher streets. Sheridan Square—more an irregular parallelogram—is bounded by Barrow, Grove, and West Fourth streets and Washington Place. They are around the corner from each other. Undoubtedly the presence of a monument to General Philip Sheridan (of Civil War fame) in Christopher Park adds to the confusion.

2. The Kent State Memorial is now at Princeton University. It was deemed "in poor taste" by Kent State University officials.

3. The gay rights movement is generally conceded to have begun with the "Stonewall uprising." Shortly after the events of June 28–29, 1969, political gay activism became more aggressive, vocal, and visible. A demonstration of this new activism was the establishment of the Gay Liberation (or Gay Pride) Day parade. This annual event, now as entrenched in New York culture as the St. Patrick's Day and Columbus Day parades, marks the anniversary of Stonewall.

4. Canadian artist Lea Vivot's *Lovers Bench,* which depicts a nude couple in a "heterosexual" embrace, was displayed without incident in both Dante Park (opposite Lincoln Center) and Battery Park on temporary loan for six months in 1985.

5. Over one hundred gay leaders and representatives of over thirty gay organizations endorsed the sculpture.

6. Voeller's retort was specious. Louise Nevelson was approached precisely because of her sexual preference.

7. Saslow took his cues, in part, from essays by Hilton Kramer dealing with Segal's oeuvre, which appeared in the *New York Times* during the fall of 1980. Kramer had an unflattering view of Segal's art.

8. James M. Saslow, "A Sculpture Without a Country," in *Christopher Street,* February 1981.

9. Very few pro letters were received. Most such letters supported the work on its artistic merits. Some mentioned how well Segal achieved his objective, yet none mentioned the merits of having such a monument. Of the hundreds of letters against the work, few rejected it on aesthetic grounds.

10. Community Board Two's stipulation was an astute political move, but it would further delay the installation of the sculpture. A reconstruction contract for Christopher Park was subject to the same approvals process that the sculpture had undergone, except longer. At each stage of a typical design contract—schematic, preliminary, final—approval was needed from the board, the Art Commission, and the Landmarks Preservation Commission. Additionally, Board Two had two internal levels of review—its parks subcommittee and its landmarks subcommittee—both of which opposed the sculpture. It is a testament to the design and diplomatic skills of Philip Winslow, the landscape architect who redesigned the park, that an approved plan was adopted by December 1982.

11. The falling out between Voeller and Putnam began over a disagreement

about the site location of a second casting of the Segal work intended for Los Angeles. The "L.A. Segal" was envisioned as early as 1980. Joel Wachs, president of the Los Angeles City Council, was an enthusiastic supporter of the work. He wrote Voeller (June 18, 1980) that he was "willing to 'go to the mat' on this one," but he showed less courage when he wrote the commissioners of the Board of Recreation and Parks of Los Angeles asking approval of the work. He mentioned neither the work's name nor its content. His description was familiar: "four life-size figures, two standing, and two seated." Putnam became disenchanted with Los Angeles and broke off with Voeller. He then offered the second casting to San Francisco. Voeller read about it in the Bay Area newspapers. He wrote San Francisco Mayor Dianne Feinstein (January 13, 1981) objecting to Putnam's unilateral action. Feinstein thanked him for alerting her to a potential conflict with a sister California city and said she would take no action as long as Los Angeles had an interest. Putnam later withdrew his offer to San Francisco and gave the second casting to Stanford University, where it is now displayed outdoors.