

Public Art Policy: Examining an Emerging Discipline

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Abstract

Public art is an emerging discipline whose practices currently exist as informal rules of thumb rather than as codified standards. The interdisciplinary nature of this field means that definitions and vocabulary must be developed to allow public administrators and artists to communicate effectively. Public artworks are shown to exist within a two-dimensional matrix defining the work in relation to its placement and its origin. Stakeholders in public art concerns are discussed, with particular emphasis on the role of the public as both art patron and taxpayer. Finally, some suggested standards for public art programs are presented.

Examining an Emerging Discipline

The artistic aspects of public art have been discussed and written about at great length, but the public policies concerning it have seldom been studied in any methodical way. In one of the few papers examining public art policy directly, Balfe & Wyszomirski (1986) note that artists and administrators have viewed each public art commission as unique, and so have been unable to use past controversies to develop guidelines for future art projects (p. 5). The established institutions in the art and art history world have failed to realize that when art moves into the public sphere, different standards and objectives must be applied if that art is to be successful, or even coherent.

This lack of scholarship is due to the fact that the field of public art is an emerging discipline. The interdisciplinary nature of public art, combining the disparate fields of fine art, museum management, art history and public administration, complicates discussions about exactly what public art is and where it should be going. For a public art program to be successful, it must call on skilled people from many disciplines and get them to work together toward a common goal. Good public art administrators are particularly skillful as interpreters, juggling the language and needs of artists, construction supervisors and politicians to manage projects that meet the needs of diverse interest groups. A common vocabulary and a clear set of goals needs to be worked out to facilitate this process.

There exists an informal but growing consensus among practitioners about what these eventual public art standards might be, but these guidelines exist more as rules-of-thumb than as codified standards. "There is still an indifference," says Phillips (1999), "to the creation of the kind of sustained theoretical or critical framework required to transform ideas and impressions into meaningful relationships and connections" (p. 5). If the field of public art is to fully mature, it will need to better define practices that can be integrated into the standards of public administration.

Defining Public Art

Some of the confusion over the status of public art comes from the lack of clear definitions. The term 'public art' is open to a wide variety of interpretations and has been applied to everything from government-funded monumental sculpture to subway graffiti. It has been used as an umbrella term to cover any art that is not housed in formal museums or galleries. What we now call public art exists in a matrix defined by two important functions; fixing the work (1) in terms of the physical space that it occupies and (2) in terms of the origin of its existence (*Fig. 1*). It should be noted that each axis of this matrix is actually a continuum with an infinite number of possible states, which has been simplified into a three-by-three grid for purposes of this discussion. In reality, it is difficult to determine exactly where any particular work of public art may fall on the matrix, unless it is occupies an extreme corner.

	Private Placement	Partial Public Placement	Public Placement
Private Origin	A-1 Art purchased by individuals or corporations and placed inside office buildings, etc.	A-2 'Corporate art' displayed outside or in common areas such as shopping malls.	A-3 Privately funded art that has been donated to the city and displayed in a park.
Partial Public Origin	B-1 Works sponsored by non-profit and charitable organizations on private property.	B-2 Small memorials in street medians and low-traffic areas.	B-3 Public/private partnerships at athletic venues, etc.
Fully Public Origin	C-1 Government funded artwork placed in government offices not generally accessible to the public.	C-2 Government funded artwork placed inside libraries or neighborhood parks.	C-3 Full government funding and prominent, highly visible locations.

Fig. 1 - Matrix of public art as a function of placement and origin, with some examples.

Art that falls in the upper-left corner of this matrix, work that is privately funded and displayed in areas that are generally not accessible by the general public is, of course, nearly immune to the possibility of controversy and negative public reception. As we move from left-to-right across the matrix, toward more public placement, the opportunities for controversy increase. A sexually explicit Robert Mapplethorpe photograph will elicit very different responses if it is displayed in a ground-floor corporate lobby as opposed to a seldom-used conference room. The same photo might be acceptable if shown in a city museum (especially if it is given proper context as part of a larger exhibition), but would surely invite controversy if it were hung in the city council chambers.

The continuum of origin or financing functions in much the same way. Art that falls near the top of the matrix is given quite a bit of leeway by the public. Even if portions of the population dislike the work, resentment toward it is likely to be more muted if public funds were not used to pay for it. The donation of problematic art to a city is likely to be shrugged off as the whim of an eccentric with nothing better to do with his or her money. People are more likely to get fired up over artwork that they have financed through the public coffers, especially if they feel that it offends their sensibilities and that they had no say in its selection.

Works that fall in the lower-right corner of the matrix (cell C-3) are the most public of public art. These are works that are likely to be the most revered or the most reviled. The fully exposed placement and full government backing makes these artworks vulnerable to attack if not administered carefully. This is the danger zone of *Tilted Arc* and the 'Squaw Peak Pots.' It is also the zone of opportunity for full public acceptance, where a work of art can be fully integrated into the culture, to become an iconic talisman of a society such as the New York Public Library Lions, the St. Louis Gateway Arch or the Chicago Picasso.

For the purposes of this paper, the term 'Public Art' will be used to discuss work that falls towards this lower-right corner of the matrix. The use of capital *P* and capital *A* is meant to signify the emerging discipline of Public Art that concerns itself with art that is the most publicly visible and is paid for largely by public funds.

Art doesn't become 'public' merely because it is exposed and accessible. Hilde Hein (1996) phrases this nicely; "The sheer presence of art out-of-doors or in a bus terminal or hotel reception area does not automatically make that art public -- no more than placing a tiger in a barnyard would make it a domestic animal" (p. 4). This thought also supports the notion that there needs to be a formal discipline of Public Art; that the standards and practices applied to traditional art work do not necessarily apply to work that is in the public realm. Standards for public art exist now only as a set of guidelines, shared informally between practitioners. These are the norms that public art commissions and other citizen's advisory panels around the country use every day when selecting works of Public Art. The artists who are successful in this field have learned what works and

what doesn't, what is likely to earn the commission and what is likely to be rejected, and so these guidelines are beginning to influence what constitutes Public Art. "Some artists and critics have proposed that successful public art is intrinsically different from 'art world' or gallery-based, art," according to Phillips (1999). "They reason that it is possible, if not commonplace, that what resonates as public art may unquestionably fail as 'art.' For them the inverse is possible as well: good art may disappoint and fail as public art" (p. 7). This is a critical point for Public Art practitioners to consider.

Consequences of Placement

Using the above matrix as a model, it is possible to anticipate under what conditions a work of art may draw public criticism. Art that speaks to a small, localized audience can be more obscure and controversial than art that is more widely viewed. Furthermore, practitioners need to consider the manner in which the audience is drawn to the art. The public encounters works on the left side of the matrix in a manner that is at least somewhat voluntary, by entering a library, office, or other controlled space. As the work is placed in more highly public spaces, the audience is likely to view it on a much more involuntary level. This can be perceived as an assault on the viewer, and when that assault comes via government funding, people are likely to object to the concept of bureaucrats forcing them into such an encounter with art. Mags Harries' *Wall Cycle to Ocotillo*, popularly known as 'The Squaw Peak Pots' is illustrative of this. The controversy that attended the unveiling of the work centered on the pots that were visible from the Squaw Peak Freeway, even though they comprised only a small portion of a much larger work. Most of the *Wall Cycle* vessels are visible only from within the neighborhoods adjacent to the freeway. These pots attracted little attention from the media and the city at large. A survey analyzed by Blair, Pijawka & Steiner (1998) indicates that these works were relatively well received by their intended audience. The public outcry over *Wall Cycle* focused almost exclusively on those few pieces that were visible to the tens of thousands of commuters using the freeway each day. The highly visible placement of these elements made them a lightning rod for controversy. Commuters stuck in traffic saw a half-dozen small pots perched along a freeway wall. When they learned that 480,000 of their 'hard-earned tax dollars' were spent to buy the work, local talk-radio stations sizzled with callers angry about project and calling for its removal. It is likely that had those few highly visible vessels been eliminated from *Wall Cycle*, that the controversy would have been avoided. Alternately, the city could have mounted a campaign early on in the project to inform the public about the art and explaining how the pots visible from the freeway were actually just 'spill-over' from a larger project aimed at reducing the impact of the new freeway on surrounding neighborhoods.

Consequences of Origin

The manner in which the art comes into its community can be as critical as its placement within that community. This axis of the Public Art matrix may be determined as much by public perception as by actual reality, so practitioners need to tread carefully in this area. The term 'origin' as used here refers to several factors surrounding the artwork. Most concretely, 'origin' refers to the funding of the project, whether from a private donation, a donation filtered through a public body, or an outright government purchase. It also refers to the originating body that places the work in the public eye: a veteran's organization, citizen-based arts council, or bureaucratic mandate. These factors can interact in subtle ways to influence public perception of where a project is coming from. Balfe and Wyszomirski make a convincing case that the controversy surrounding *Tilted Arc* stemmed, at least in part, from the Government Services Administration's practices. The GSA's Art-in-Architecture program did not allow for public input and fueled the perception that the federal government was forcing an unwanted work of art on a powerless public. The authors contrast the debacle of *Tilted Arc* with the Art-in-Public-Places program of the National Endowment for the Arts, which has been relatively free of controversy. Art-in-Public-Places utilizes local sponsors and commissions as buffers between the federal government and local citizenry, thus moving the art out of the most extreme cell of the matrix (C-3), and out of the danger zone.

Recently, the City of Scottsdale, Arizona was able to dodge an impending controversy simply by finding a private donor to finance the purchase of art that some had deemed offensive. The Scottsdale Public Art Committee was angrily split over the decision to purchase prints from provocative artist Judy Chicago. Committee member Richard Hayslip, quoted in an *Arizona Republic* article (22 June, 2004), described his predicament, "The material is highly offensive," adding that due to the use of city funds to purchase the prints, "We have a certain responsibility to observe the standards and tastes of the community of Scottsdale." An anonymous donor then stepped forward and purchased the prints for \$4,500 and donated them to the city. The *Arizona Republic* reported the reaction of Valerie Vadala Homer, director of public art: "This is the best possible

solution . . . The purchase of the art [with public funds] would have been deemed controversial by some, and now the purchase has been made with private funds at the discretion of a private donor.” Note that the final disposition of the artwork, as part of the City of Scottsdale permanent art collection, was unchanged as a result of this transaction. The prints are exactly as offensive to 'the standards and tastes of the community of Scottsdale' as they were before, but by altering the funding source, moving the artwork from cell C-3 to A-3 in the above matrix, the work has become acceptable to all concerned.

Publicly Recognized Art

For art to truly be public, it must be somehow embraced by that public. It must pass from the realm of the private encounter into an area of shared cultural experience. The most notable contemporary example of this is Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Despite some early controversy surrounding it, it has become, quite literally, a touchstone for Americans visiting the nation's capital.

Discussions of the Vietnam War still split public opinion decades after the fact, as witnessed by the competing claims by, and charges against, the 2004 presidential candidates. It is surprising that this unpopular war was memorialized less than a decade after the last troops were withdrawn, and long before memorials to World War II and the Korean War were built. How could this war, which had so bitterly split the country, be memorialized in a way that would not offend large segments of the public? Lin's elegant solution reconciled the two sides of the discussion by highlighting their common grief at the loss of human life through the listing of individual names.

The ultimate challenge for artists working in this field, then, is to create, as in the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, something that transcends the object, the artist, and even the individual viewer to connect with an entire culture; to become truly public not just in location or funding, but in spirit as well. This is the standard to which all great Public Art should aspire. “To be public”, writes Michael Kelly (1996), “Art must be created with a recognition on the artist's part of the people who constitute the 'public' of public art, whoever they are” (p. 17).

Stakeholders and Their Expectations

For this newly defined field of Public Art to succeed, practitioners will need to be able to apply sound public administration principles. A reasonable way to start this process is by identifying the stakeholders involved in Public Art and recognizing their needs. Citizen advisory boards have started this process by seating representatives from government, community activists, business and arts interests. The roles of these stakeholders, however, may need to be re-thought in light of this new model of Public Art.

Artists:

There is an emerging breed of artists who specialize in working in the public realm. These are the people who are routinely winning major commissions and are actively working out the vocabulary that is needed to push the boundaries of the field. To succeed at this, the artists will have to go against one of the prevailing tenets of modernism, what Hein (1996) calls “the autonomous individual, glorified in the person of the artist and secondarily in the created object, transcends the public, whose emancipatory benefit is vicarious and derivative” (p. 1). Rather than putting the *artist's vision* first, the *public's reception of that vision* will have to predominate in conceiving the work. This is a much more difficult task than simply creating art in a vacuum.

Art Establishment:

Critics, art historians and academics will have to undergo a similar change if they are to interpret Public Art sensibly. Additionally, professionals in arts education will need to imbue young artists with the idea of Public Art as a field in its own right.

Private Institutions:

Serving as an important intermediary between artists, donors, citizens and governmental agencies, charitable, non-profit and corporate sponsors will have a key role in the future of Public Art.

Governmental Agencies:

Arts and cultural agencies at all levels of government will need to coordinate to develop best practices for the field of Public Art. These practices will need to be crafted carefully, with input from both arts and public administration professionals. The challenge will be to craft policies that maximize public acceptance of the works commissioned, while retaining full freedom of artistic expression.

The Public:

The public has been the most overlooked stakeholder in public art. There has often been only token public representation in the commissioning of public art. The GSA guidelines for citizen input specify that representatives need to be knowledgeable about both “the community in which the work of art will be commissioned and knowledgeable in current American art” (Balfe & Wyszomirski, p. 24). This requirement

ensures that only a very small segment of art-savvy activists will have their views considered, and is not a good formula for broad public acceptance. Future Public Art practitioners will need to consider their public from multiple, overlapping viewpoints, rather than as a single, monolithic block.

The Public as Patron

This is the most critical and most difficult stakeholder for Public Art to consider, both in artistic and political terms. Artists often seem to be determined to force an unwilling public to accept their vision, like a parent forcing a child to choke down his vegetables. When Richard Serra tried to radically reformulate the space of the Manhattan's Federal Plaza in an effort to educate his public about the oppressive nature of government bureaucracy, the results were predictably disastrous. His sculpture, *Tilted Arc*, was a curving, rusty and foreboding wall of steel that bisected the sterile concrete of the plaza. "The public rejected Serra's offer to be enlightened," writes Kelly (1996), "and reciprocated the confrontational gesture by blocking his efforts to redefine space without being consulted" (p. 17). The outcry over *Tilted Arc* ultimately led to the destruction of the work.

Kelly contrasts Serra's *Tilted Arc* with Lin's work where, "the organizers and the designer of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial were attuned to their using public from the start, putting them in a good position to defend the memorial to the public before, during, and after it was built" (p. 18). Hein offers a model that integrates the public from the outset of the work: "The audience is no longer figured as passive onlooker but as participant, actively implicated in the constitution of the work of art . . . The integration of the public into the work of art is inherently political" (p. 3).

There is a great, unspoken fear about treating the public as a legitimate patron of Public Art, rather than simply as a passive viewer. Public Art practitioners, whether artists, sponsors or commission members, are afraid of a public that views Thomas Kinkade as the world's greatest living painter. Kinkade sells millions of dollars worth of maudlin paintings, posters and coffee mugs every year and has outlets in many shopping malls. Although millions love his work, Kinkade is virtually unknown in the academic and professional arts community.

Senie (2003) captures the essence of the rift between practitioners of Public Art and their audience when she notes that critics, curators and some artists distrust the general public as an audience and that a popular work of art is often given short shrift. She cites *Towers of Light*, the temporary artwork installed at the site of the World Trade Center tragedy, as an example of an extremely popular work of public art that received little attention from the art establishment.

This disconnect between practitioners and the public needs to be resolved for Public Art to be truly integrated into society. The challenge for the Public Artist is to make engaging, legitimate art that connects not just with the cognoscenti, but also with the general population. This is an incredibly difficult requirement, but it is also an amazing opportunity for true artistic expression.

The Public as Taxpayer

In his analysis of *Tilted Arc*, Kelly (1996) notes that Serra "seems to prefer to work in countries with strong governments which are not directly responsible to the public, that is, which are less democratic than the United States" (p.18). As Serra's preference for less-democratic workspaces shows, Public Art is a lot easier if the public is shut out of the process. We, in the United States, feel a certain democratic ownership of our public art. As 'owners' of that art, we are understandably peeved when it seems that the taxes we involuntarily pay are used to purchase art that we don't like and that we had no say in choosing. News stories stoking the controversies surrounding public art projects inevitably talk about the cost of the work much more than the artistic content. This makes a certain amount of sense for, as Senie (1998) notes, "money is easier to understand than art" (p. 242).

The public should know that their money is being spent wisely, and it is up to the practitioners of Public Art to show that art is a legitimate and necessary expense. This accountability should become as much a part of the job of the Public Art practitioner as sculpting models or overseeing a percent-for-art program. By more clearly defining exactly what Public Art is, what its standards and practices are and who constitutes its audience, the "sales pitch" to the public will be more logical and coherent.

Some Suggested Standards

This new Public Art paradigm calls for clearly stated and widely disseminated goals and standards. These standards have begun to emerge on an informal basis, but need to be refined and formalized. There have already been several forays into this area of inquiry, which can serve as a basis for further discussion.

The dilemma facing Public Art, as with any social service provider, is how to quantify the effectiveness of an organization whose primary outputs are intangible values rather than concrete products. Although a Public Art program might be seen as producing a product in the form of a bronze sculpture, for instance, the worth of that sculpture will be far greater than the scrap value of the bronze. Assessing the net societal benefit of a work of public art is at least as difficult as determining the benefit of an affirmative action program or the value of setting aside an additional acre of wilderness. Stephen E. Weil (2003), writing about traditional art museums, suggests that we should not try to gauge meaningless outputs such as the number of shows mounted, or attendance at those shows, but rather at the outcomes that are produced as a result of those outputs. There may be a temptation to measure outputs because they are often simply easier to measure than other, more meaningful concepts. It should be remembered that an accurate measurement of a meaningless indicator is no more useful than a poor measurement of a significant indicator. Weil argued that techniques of outcome-based evaluation could be applied to judge the effects of art on its intended audience. Perhaps the tools of social science research can be employed to measure the impact of public art upon the viewing public.

Senie (2003) provides somewhat more specific suggestions that complement Weil's general observations, and also raises some interesting questions that should be addressed. She echoes Weil's call for an evaluation of outcomes over outputs when she asks us to consider community-based public art projects which have citizen input and participation, for example in the form of schoolchildren helping an established artist design and execute a mural, as a major component (p. 5). In works such as this, the process of creating the art is likely to be at least as important as the final work itself, so different standards may apply.

Senie (2003) also asserts, "it is arguable that in public art, the site is the content" (p. 1). In its earliest incarnation, public art, usually in the form of sculpture, was simply placed in a location where it was readily visible to the public, with no consideration given to how the art fits with the surrounding landscape. Soon it was recognized that artworks should be placed in areas that somehow enhanced or showcased the piece. This has evolved over time to the current preference for 'site specific' art that has been created especially for the conditions at a chosen location. Practitioners usually see removing a site-specific work to another location as tantamount to destruction of the art, by robbing it of the context within which it was intended to be viewed. Senie's quote extends this line of thinking to the next logical step; the site itself becomes part of the artwork, not just a location that reflects the work. This has tremendous implications not only for artists, but also for public art administrators who often are intimately involved in the site-selection process.

Finally, Senie (2003) boils down her quest for evaluation standards to three questions we should be prepared to ask of public art:

- 1) Is it good work, according to its type: art, urban design, or community project?
- 2) Does it improve or energize its site in some way – by providing an aesthetic experience or seating (or both) or prompting conversation and perhaps social awareness?
- 3) Is there evidence of relevant or appropriate public engagement or use? (p. 7)

Brian McAvera (2001) came up with a specific list which may also serve as a sensible starting place for discussing standards and guidelines applicable to Public Art: His standards include requirements for citizen participation in the commissioning process and educational and maintenance components to any public art program (p. 9). The primary thrust of these new standards must always be to consider the public for whom the Public Art is intended. Public Art needs to communicate with its audience without resorting to the lowest common denominator. Artists working in this field also need to be able to fully articulate the meaning of their work to that public. "The 'What is it?' question must be answered," says Senie (1998), "And if all we can come up with is 'It's art,' that's not enough, unless it comes with a useful art context that will begin to make the work meaningful to any viewer" (p. 243).

Finally, a review of the literature shows only one quantitative study concerning public art. The surveys concerning the 'Squaw Peak Pots' by Blair, Pijawka and Steiner are now several years old, and a follow-up study is in order. This study showed broad acceptance of public art in general, with a lower level of support for the Pots themselves, but with a trend toward greater acceptance over time. This once-controversial project is

now 12 years old and anecdotal evidence indicates that it has at last become accepted by the community. A new survey, building upon the previous ones from the early and late 1990s, will help complete a longitudinal baseline that can be used to plot the curve of citizen acceptance for public art. This data will be useful in further refining the criteria and goals of Public Art.

From its earliest days, with the controversies surrounding the Washington Monument, public art in the United States has been administered through crisis management. In the past few decades, this has begun to change with the appointment of public art commissions and the emergence of professional managers for public art programs. Now is the time for the field of Public Art to come into full maturity through the adoption of clear, research-based objectives and standards and an integration of sound public administration principles.

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