Preface

The role of the spectator is to determine the weight of the work on the esthetic scale. (Duchamp 1957: 819)

I cannot think of a single book on public art that commences with Marcel Duchamp. Maybe this is not surprising. Duchamp, the irreverent artist-provocateur, is best known as a Dadaist. Con-founded by the massive violence of World War I, the Dada artists responded to senseless cruelty and destruction with artworks that trafficked in absurdity, mocking conventional art world pretensions. Dadaism was a social movement as much as an artistic one; the aforementioned “esthetic scale” actually encompassed much more than aesthetics. Audiences were asked to interrogate the foundations of society, moving beyond collective and individual comfort zones. Dadaism represented an unwillingness to accept things as they are, resisting complicit endorsement of the status quo. “Spectators” bore a great responsibility – if not to change their behaviors, at least to question the social norms that formed them. Duchamp instinctively apprehended the viewer’s primary role in the art experience. In “The Creative Act” (1957), he scrutinizes the authority of the artist, and affirms the power of the spectator. He describes the “art coefficient” as a gap between an artist’s intention and the artwork’s realization, where viewers actively engage with and interpret the art. Duchamp proposes that an artist cannot fully express his own intent, so the viewer must complete the Creative Act;
without someone to react to and interact with the art, the artistic process is forever unfinished, a still-born idea never seizing its absolute potential. No longer a passive act, “viewing” gives way to a multitude of readings, limited only by the number of people in a work’s audience. Duchamp offered a potent analogy, describing art in its “raw state” as molasses, which is then “refined” into pure sugar by its spectators (1957: 818–19). The artist provides the source material, but it is the viewer—without her own viewpoint, taste, education, and experience—who discerns its meaning and relevance. Once art is shared with a larger public, the artist surrenders control to the unpredictable will and whims of “the people.”

In the glossary of *New-Land-Marks* public art is defined as “art placed in public places and spaces,” and those spaces as “open to everyone to use and enjoy” (Bach 2001: 153). If only it were that easy! The contours of art’s publicness are continually assessed on its physical location. But as Hilde Heine observes, “The sheer presence of art out-of-doors or in a bus terminal or a 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” (1996: 4). I suggest we can best understand art’s public functions when we consider the interrelationship between content and audience; what art has to say, to whom it speaks, and the multiple messages it may convey. This approach prompts several questions: Is public art’s responsibility “to communicate with the public”? To do so, must it transcend an artist’s private or aesthetic concerns, and “generate human reaction” from a larger audience (Doezema 1977: 9, 14)? If so, how big must that audience be? As early as 1903, Charles Miliard Robinson’s *Modern Civic Art* called for art that was comprehensible and socially relevant to its audiences, addressing “the conditions before their very eyes” (1983: 34). But the notion of a shared artistic vocabulary has long since dissipated; as Arlene Raven contends, “public art isn’t a horse on a horse any more” (1989: 1). Through his experiences as a public art administrator Jerry Allen observed that the civic symbolism of the past was a language in which the public was no longer “fluent.” He queries: “Can substantially fewer than everybody be the audience for public art without destroying the public character of the art?” Allen concludes that since public art is “broad and heterogeneous,” speaking to wide though not necessarily large and generalized audiences, it would be best to define a “new public” for each work (1985: 246–7, 250–1). For Patricia Phillips art only becomes fully public when it takes “the idea of public as the genesis and subject for analysis”: “it is public because of the kinds of questions it chooses to ask or address, and not because of its accessibility or volume of viewers” (1992: 298).

To this I would add that art’s publicness rests in the quality and impact of its exchanges with audiences. These do not hinge on wide acceptance, but on the art’s ability to extend reasonable and fair opportunities for members of the public to understand and negotiate their own relationships with it. I propose to conceive public art primarily through this populist agenda.

A few words must be said about the frictions—perceived and actual—between art elitists and populists, although caution must be exercised when dealing in such binaries. Generally, elitists emphasize the need for professionalism and formal education in the arts, art-specific institutions, and standards of quality according to established canons of taste. For them the boundaries of culture are fixed though fragile; they are perceived as centurions standing guard over and imposing their culture on others. Conversely, populists usually argue for the widest possible availability of art experiences, welcome cultural diversity, and promote public (often “amateur”) participation in and experiential relationships to art. Their pluralistic construction of artistic merit, open-ended definitions of taste, and insistence on art’s subjectivity and mutability prompt elitists to charge them with eroding culture’s quality and substance. These conflicting agendas result in what Margaret Wyszomirski identified as “the tension between the quest for excellence and the quest for equality.” She concludes that these “quests” might coalesce in a framework of cultural democracy, if we temper the notion of “elite” art audiences with “open-door exclusivity” (1982: 15–14, 17; Levine 1988: 255). I interpret this as an egalitarian impulse; to provide all interested parties with an entree into the arts that nurtures confidence in their own critical faculties, but allows final decisions about engagement to rest with each individual. Yet such agency can be hampered by what Miwon Kwon identifies as art’s great myth: the presumption that it is “good” and “everybody wants it” (Arning, Chin, Jacob, and Kwon 2006).
Edward Arian outlined the premises of cultural democracy: art experiences develop good citizenship and enhance the quality of life; all citizens have the right to art experiences, the provision of which “is a public responsibility not unlike health and education”; and people of all backgrounds and classes are desirous of art experiences when presented with options to engage in such. These principles manifest themselves in a specifically populist approach as codified in American arts legislation: emphasis on broad-based exposure to and consumption of the arts; conviction that art contributes to individual humanistic growth; a belief that government should foster each citizen’s development on behalf of its own welfare; the need to showcase and support the talent of artists; and an effort to make the arts part of people’s everyday lives. But Arian asserts that cultural democracy exists only when people are able to assess “their cultural needs and determine the programs that will best meet those needs and express their individual identities” (1989: 3–5, 24–9; Kardon 1980: 8). Though disparate, the sites and works of decidedly populist public art share at least one if not all of the following three qualities. First, they create immersive, experiential environments: instead of building independent objects around which audiences must negotiate, designers usually produce enveloping settings to traverse through. Next, each engenders highly proactive relationships with visitors, predicated on participatory interaction, not passive viewership. And finally, they are frequently private ventures or public–private partnerships; without portending to a false sense of egalitarianism, these are often more inviting and potentially civic-spirited than their typical public art counterparts.

In 1981 John Beardsley argued that most discussions of public art were limited to issues of physical rather than emotional or intellectual accessibility (1981b: 43). Since that time there have been many efforts to broaden public art’s accessibility, with mixed results. I contend that art becomes most fully public when it has palpable populist sentiments – the extension of emotional and intellectual, as well as physical, accessibility to the audience – not a pretension toward such. Unfettered physical access is an empty gesture if the public does not feel other forms of accessibility are within its grasp too. Accordingly the placement, funding, and content of public art will be scrutinized here as related to audience engagement. Assessments of audience response made throughout the text are based upon years of research, including my personal observations of and conversations with members of the public. The book begins with an overview of American public art’s “official” history since the early twentieth century, when governmental programs nurtured notions of cultural democracy. The second chapter considers artworks that fit within conventional paradigms of public art, but evidence heightened populist intent. Chapter 3 examines interrelationships between art museums and public art, and queries how museums can further enhance their well-intentioned efforts at civic engagement. In the fourth chapter we encounter private patrons and industry that have succeeded in capturing the public’s imagination, and ask what public artists and administrators can learn from them. Chapter 5 argues for viewers’ increased agency to determine the levels of engagement with art and merits of their own art experiences, whether these be intentional or not. The concluding chapter addresses some persistent woes that often accompany public art and works that manage to avoid these, highlighting venues and situations in which populist public art thrives, and could do so in the future.

Although focused on the United States, the wider critical scope of the questions raised here is relevant to public art elsewhere. The US is a vast and greatly differentiated country, with nearly limitless local artistic dialects and regional cultures. In an increasingly pluralistic society, Beardsley reminds us, there are no coherent belief systems or definitive interpretations; “public values are not universal, but a function of their epoch and locale. ... An art that expresses the values of all the people is impossible to achieve” (1981b: 43–4). In The Public and Its Problems, John Dewey made much the same observation, noting that the “public” always changes with time and place, and suggesting that such a public is “too diffused and scattered and too intricate in composition” to be treated as a holistic entity (1927: 33, 137). An attempt to discern a unitary national aesthetic or any such consensus is futile. But while a single vox populi cannot exist, this book strives to identify and contextualize dominant or recurrent traits shared among the spectrum of American sensibilities, and provide a fuller
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understanding of our shared culture and more accurate barometers of our tastes. To do so will lead to some sources that critics might regard as unsophisticated or unworthy as “art.” In his sensitive study of Holocaust memorials, James Young observes that traditional modes of art historical inquiry cannot fully accommodate the “social life” of public art, which fuses art, popular culture, historical memory, and political consequences. He proclaims: “Rather than patronizing mass tastes, we must recognize that public taste carries weight” (1993: 11–13). But while definitions of “high” and “low” culture continually shift, “popular culture” remains maligned by those seeking to “maintain their ideological authority by defining ‘good’ and ‘bad’ culture.” We need to recognize popular culture as “a potentially powerful and progressive political force,” which liberates its makers and users from “the top-down strictures of high culture” to subvert the “dominant notions of taste” (Jenkins, McPherson, and Shattuc 2002: 26–8).

In No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture, Andrew Ross warns against taking a “conspiratorial view” of mass culture as a monolithic, “profitable opiate” imposed on a passive public of consumers that uncritically accepts such culture. He posits that critics who take such dim views of popular culture engage in an undemocratic sort of intellectual hysteria, or sample that culture only to reinforce their status as they are “slumming” it. Conversely, other critics unquestioningly embrace popular culture’s “gee-whizzery” (1989: 4–5, 7, 45, 50–2). I wish to do none of the above. My populist perspective seeks balance between the hypercritical and uncritical nodes; to reorient our appreciation for artworks already absorbed into the canon, highlight the viewer’s role, and suggest an expanded terrain for public art. The intent is not to measure “successes” and “failures,” but rather to assess art’s publicness and engage in a jargon-free discussion of its pertinent issues. By proposing a more widely constituted domain for the study and practice of public art, disparate artworks, organizations, and individuals might be able to coexist, if not agree. The complications brought by public art’s complexity are also its opportunities. Though “public art” cannot be pinned down with a single, reductive definition, hopefully a more panoramic view of the field shall emerge here. Like Duchamp,
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artists were more frequently commissioned to respond to particular places. Instead of glorified decorators sprucing things up at a project’s end, artists consulted more often in the early planning stages.

A-i-A’s percent-for-art formula subsequently became the model for many state and municipal art programs that also draw funds from construction budgets, and place art in sites such as schools and parks. In 1959 Philadelphia passed the first municipal percent-for-art ordinance in the US, followed next by Baltimore (1964), San Francisco (1967), and Seattle (1973). Hawaii became the first state to follow suit and adopted its percent-for-art policy in 1967. Yet, it would be misleading to say that the GSA consistently brought an enlightened approach to public art processes. Many A-i-A artists had little effect upon their sites’ overall design, often commissioned to “formulate solutions compatible with an extant architectural conception” (Prokopoff 1981: 79). Some A-i-A works remain vigorously scrutinized by critics bemoaning the unfortunate proliferation of “plop art,” guided by an “unstated assumption that a successful museum or gallery artist would be a successful public artist” (Senie 1992b: 230). Dubbed “turds in the plaza” by architect James Wines, such art is typified by the lone, epic, abstract sculpture, resting awkwardly in But unrelated to its vast surroundings. Its life being granted through percent-for-art dictates rather than an understanding of shared public culture, “plop art” cannot be saved by its egalitarian ambitions.

Although the GSA has aspired to greater outreach and consensus-building in the last few decades, emphasizing regional representation on selection panels and organizing meetings for artists and community members to discuss potential sites and local history, its heritage is still marked by some autocratic decision-making. The most enduring example of such was its 1979 commission of Tilted Arc, a 73-ton, 12-foot-high, 120-foot-long curved expanse of Cor-Ten steel, which self-oxidizes to yield a rusty patina. Artist Richard Serra conceived the work for its specific site, Federal Plaza (Jacob K. Javits Building, New York City), using pedestrian traffic patterns to determine both its form and placement. In 1989, eight years after its installation, Tilted Arc was dismantled under the cover of night. (Although this was authorized by the GSA’s Acting Administrator, Dwight Ink, it was Regional Administrator William Diamond who pushed for the Arc’s removal.) It remains in storage indefinitely. Complaints about the work’s aesthetic impoverishment (a brooding, corroded “wall”), impediment of the space’s “social use” (open space in Manhattan being a precious commodity), and spoiling effect on the surrounding environment (supposedly it lured graffiti, litter, rats, and criminals into the plaza) were touted as the impetus for its “departure.” In actuality, an even wider matrix of factors came into play. Countless articles and numerous books have debated the Arc’s relative merits and weaknesses and the legal battles over its removal, so a protracted account is unnecessary here. But that the Arc persists to remind us of a federal agency overstepping its boundaries (at least from the art world’s perspective) is essential.

According to Serra, Tilted Arc was designed to forge social function from sculptural space, and visually link various governmental buildings. The artist hoped to reorient visitors’ perceptual relationships, to “dislocate or alter the decorative function of the plaza and actively bring people into the sculpture’s context” (Serra qtd. in Doss 1995: 32). But critics argued that Serra subjugated the plaza in servitude to his sculpture, being more concerned with physical rather than social context (McConathy 1987: 11–12). Steven Dubin suggests no “overt message” accounted for Tilted Arc’s problems, but rather it was Serra’s aesthetic choices, “whose artful qualities eluded” the public (1992: 25). Described as a “sullen blade,” “eyesore,” and “iron curtain” (Senie 1984: 52; Danto 1987: 90), to some viewers the Arc was overbearing and even menacing. Harriet Senie writes: “There was no way to avoid it; one became, willingly or not, a participant (not a spectator) in a city where staying uninvolved was … the preferred way to negotiate a public space” (2002: xiv). Thomas Hine concludes that Tilted Arc was “a great work of art,” but the “qualities that gave it its power were precisely those that made it difficult to live with every day” (2001: 41).

Serra’s emphasis on site-specificity transformed the act of removal into one of destruction for those critical of the GSA’s practices. This claim gains credence in light of several facts. Serra’s previous work was well known, and the GSA sought him out for a permanent piece (Serra received verbal assurances confirming this; Buskirk 1991: 43). After exhaustive project evaluation and approving
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detailed plans specifying scale, placement, and material, which included revisions made per the GSA’s request, Serra was awarded the contract. The GSA knew what it was getting from Serra; as Robert Hughes snapped: “It did not expect a cute broncze of Peter Pan” (1985: 78). Finally, the GSA had troubled commissions in its recent past, most notably George Sugarmen’s Baltimore Federal (1975–7), which a US District judge described as a “security threat” despite its bright colors, whimsical abstract forms, and provision of seating. Though the A-I-A program was temporarily halted and an internal review conducted (Balfe and Wyszomirski 1987: 24), Sugarmen’s work remained in place, thanks to a mobilized art community, and the local press and people (Lewis 1977: 40; Thalacker 1980: 8–13; Senic 1992b: 176–7). As proven by the Baltimore case, “understanding is not instant” (Allen 1985: 248), yet the GSA did little to enhance public receptivity toward Tilted Arc before its installation. A small scale model of the work that “gave little real notion of the size and impact of the full piece” was placed in the GSA building’s lobby, while a pole-and-string stakeout on the plaza offered no “accurate impression of the mass and solidity of the artwork itself” (Balfe and Wyszomirski 1987: 25). The GSA also did little to address resentment toward the work after its installation (Storr 1989: 276), which may have been intensified by poor working conditions at the site (McConnolly 1987: 4). Though it can take years for an intended audience to acclimate to an artwork, and for a commissioning agency to evaluate the public’s reactions (Grant 1989: 82), the GSA was anxious to cut bait.

The tribulations of Tilted Arc made their way to the general press, with publications like People Weekly portraying the work as a conspiracy between the federal government and art elite against the “people” (Carlson 1985: 138). But Serra’s supporters perceived no such alliance between government and the art world. Instead they saw something insidious in the GSA’s actions, believing that Tilted Arc’s removal was not actually motivated by the will of a deeply offended public, but by political aspirations, especially those of zealous GSA Regional Administrator William Diamond, who entered the scene three years after the work was installed. Since the GSA covers all design, execution, and installation costs, the agency maintains propriety rights over the works it commissions, and retains final authority over artwork removal or relocation. Prompted in particular by the complaints of Chief Justice Edward D. Re, Diamond circulated petitions and convened a Tilted Arc hearing, claiming to carry out the public’s wishes. Diamond presided over the hearing and personally selected a five-member panel to hear testimony, none of whom were experts on public art. The hearing was to determine whether or not Tilted Arc should remain in situ— that is, in its original, intended location—or be relocated, though as Robert Storr observes, the hearing seemed little more than “parliamentary niceties” providing “camouflage for a fixed agenda” (1989: 273). While some members of the public decried the piece upon its installation, it remains unclear if they were still as upset by the time of the March 1985 hearing. Only 58 people bothered to testify against Tilted Arc, though there were more than 10,000 employees at Federal Plaza then, in addition to any other concerned citizens (Serra 1989: 56–7; Weyergren-Serra and Buskirk 1991: 23, 57). Two-thirds of those who testified at the hearing, and the majority of those who wrote the GSA in regard to the matter, were in favor of keeping the work in situ (Senic 1989: 299). Yet Diamond’s hearing concluded the piece would be removed, although the Arc was supposed to remain on the plaza until an alternative location was found. Diamond’s detractors maintain he was predisposed against the work and manipulated public opinion and the media, creating what Serra characterized as an “imagined majority,” to have the piece destroyed (1989: 37–8). The possibility of relocation was a moot point. While venues like Storm King Art Center expressed interest in hosting Tilted Arc they were unwilling to do so without the artist’s consent, and Serra indicated he would disclaim authorship if the piece were installed elsewhere (Weyergren-Serra and Buskirk 1991: 133). Though Hughes quipped that “the world is full of formerly ‘site-specific’ art,” which has “not died from being moved” (1985: 78), as Nick Kaye perceives site-specific work, to move it is to “re-place it, to make it something else” (2000: 2).

Tilted Arc prompts questions about democracy that extend beyond the impact of the American two-party political system on public art. (It was commissioned under Carter’s liberal Democratic administration, while its removal occurred in the wake of Reagan-era conservatism and was led by Diamond, a Republican
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political appointee.) Though Serra, who honed his skills working in steel mills as a young adult, acknowledges that there are situations in which “the people’s needs and my needs could be mutually related,” he disavows populism as “art defeating.” He proclaims that attracting “a bigger audience has nothing to do with the making of art” (Serra qtd. in Senic 1984: 55), and contends that “Tilted Arc was never intended to – nor did it – speak for the United States Government” (1989: 43). To protect the work Serra sued in 1986 for violation of his contract, free speech, and due process (McConathy 1987-14), though his complaint and appeal were subsequently dismissed. When testifying at the 1985 hearing, Victor Ganz, then chair of the Battery Park City fine arts committee, implored the GSA to “have the courage to be elitist enough to be truly democratic” (Ganz qtd. in Howarth 1985: 99). But like Ganz, many of those who spoke in Serra’s favor (as well as the NEA panel members who concluded removal of the Arc was tantamount to its destruction), are fairly categorized as art world “insiders.” Were these people truly representative of or concerned for the broader public, or were they answering a call of duty to defend one of their own, attempting to insulate the borders of “high art”? And in his insistence upon a site-specificity that privileged aesthetics, did Serra consider the rights of the public, or only his own? While we may never determine whether it was truly populist forces that removed Tilted Arc, or if the people’s voices were actually quieted by powerful vigilante bureaucrats, Thomas Crow finds the GSA’s claims to represent the public rooted in “a decidedly elitist presumption about what such people can and cannot absorb” (1996: 148-9). Erika Doss concurs, arguing that the GSA appropriated a “populist tone” to skew “the democratic process.” Thus “Tilted Arc’s removal had less to do with public autonomy than with GSA sovereignty,” though she notes that it is too easy to blame “the state” or a “cultural elite” as such polarization eclipses the nuances of public life (1995: 33-4). Regardless, the controversy made two things clear: the commissioning and installation processes for Tilted Arc were “distinctly flawed” (Balfe and Wysomirski 1987: 25), and the subsequent removal of public art calls for as much careful consideration as its initial placement.

A Short History of the United States’ “Official” Public Art

Before Tilted Arc’s installation, the plaza was not a “little lunchtime oasis” (Carlson 1985: 138), but a fairly inhospitable place with undistinguished architecture and a broken fountain (Crow 1996: 148). As described by Hughes, Federal Plaza was “one of the ugliest public spaces in America” (1985: 78). Immediately after the Arc’s removal a gaggle of standard-issue benches and planters were placed there, until the plaza required major structural work and the GSA folded an art initiative into its repairs budget. The agency “unilaterally” selected Martha Schwartz, who in 1997 furnished the space with more standard-issue benches (but this time acid-green ones arranged in serpentine patterns), which snake around mounds of earth (originally covered with grass, but since replanted with shrubs) occasionally spewing steam. On the Broadway side of the plaza now stands Beverly Pepper’s Sentinels (1996), four abstract columns in that same rusty Cor-Ten steel. As Senic points out, there is more than a little irony here; though one can now sit and ignore the art more easily, there is no direct path across the plaza, which is still a place people rarely linger (2002: 96, 98-100, 102). In fact, both of the new works lack the strong presence of Serra’s piece; Schwartz’s design is playful in an ordinary way (colors and curves must be fun!), while Pepper’s slender, vertical sculptures can escape notice altogether. Serra did not necessarily make Federal Plaza any prettier with Tilted Arc, nor did he make the pedestrian’s commute any shorter or view any clearer. But he did make the space interesting. One of the most essential services the public artist can provide is to activate a space, which is precisely what Serra did for Federal Plaza, both physically and socially. Crow suggests that given the site’s symbolism as a seat of federal authority, and its proximity to downtown art neighborhoods, one could anticipate that Tilted Arc would come “under extraordinary scrutiny in both its civic and aesthetic manifestations.” But he also insists the plaza is permanently marked by “the shared memory of the trauma of the sculpture’s removal” (Crow 1996: 144, 150). Tilted Arc’s fate has become the key to its lasting value; unable to stay in its intended home, the dialogue it fosters extends its lifespan in perpetuity. Crow concludes:

Large questions concerning the relations between public symbols and private ambitions, between political freedom, legal obligations
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and aesthetic choice, have been put vividly and productively into play by the work, engendering debates that might have been abstract and idle had it not existed—and which might have been complacently put aside had it gone on existing. (1996: 150)

Among continued hesitations about A-i-A is that it expects artworks like Titled Arc to rehabilitate poorly designed architecture or unwelcoming public spaces and provide amenities, even when artists make no claims to do so. Patricia Phillips suggests that percent-for-art programs often lead to a “minimum basic standard” that ultimately begets mediocrity and thwarts creative potential (1988: 93). But as director of the Arts for Transit program (responsible for placing public art in New York’s subway system), Wendy Feuer questioned the appropriateness of governmental funding for confrontational works. Though Feuer acknowledged the desirability of challenging art experiences, she recognized their increased vulnerability in widely accessible public settings (1989: 139–40, 145, 148, 153). Almost any percent-for-art initiative has the capacity to generate controversy; works are aimed at audiences that might have “no particular interest in art” and placed where one “can’t really avoid them.” Alan Ehrenhalt proposes that such programs fare better when they involve “ordinary people who will be the front-line consumers day in and out.” While he admits such measures could not guarantee “better artistic decisions, or even necessarily different ones,” he asserts there is much to gain in giving the public a voice about matters on its own turf (1994: 9–10). After the Titled Arc debacle, the A-i-A selection process seemed more thoughtful and even tentative, and the GSA made earlier outreach efforts to “local communities which are to be recipients of the art” (Ted Weiss qtd. in Howarth 1985: 98). Yet we should not encourage the GSA to reduce public art to a “popularity contest.” As Senie reminds us: “Controversy is loud and appreciation often silent and unmeasurable” (1992b: 230). Clearly, matters of taste cannot, and ought not, be legislated. The management of government sponsorship, art world sentiments, and public relations is not a task for the diplomatically challenged.

End here.
Chapter 2  Conventional Wisdom: Populist Intentions within Established Paradigms

The history of art has sometimes been presented as a history of styles. The history of public art will more likely be seen as a history of intentions. (Miles 1989: 39)

As stated in Chapter 1, public art’s basic criteria have often been delineated as follows: its works are designated for larger audiences, and placed to attract their attention; it intends to provide aesthetic experiences that edify, commemorate, or entertain; and its messages are comprehensible to generalized audiences. Historically American public art (although we are not alone in this) had frequently sited into predictably reductive, overplayed categories such as the war monument, tribute portrait, or austere abstraction. These were usually “fittingly dignified” and “understandable but not innovative” (Dozema 1977: 18–19). Yet even when working within the conventional paradigms of public art, some artists have managed to enlarge and challenge such traditions instead of regurgitating formulaic “solutions,” and tease out slippages between the “public” and “private.” In doing so, these artists embody a more populist attitude. Some of their pieces are so completely absorbed into the surroundings they literally escape notice as “art”; they nudge at and whisper to us so that we perceive their effects in subtle ways. Other works scream for our attention; unwilling to be “mitigated by site or circumstance, they insist we pay them mind.

Writing in 1988, Patricia Phillips complained that public art lacked “clear definitions,” “constructive theory,” or “coherent objectives” (1988: 93). While the public art field has grown immensely in the last 20 years, such definitions, theory, and objectives still elude us; by emphasizing the function of populist sensibilities in public art, these come into sharper focus, particularly the objectives. Many critics fear that populism engenders a flattening out of art, exchanging edginess for mass appeal, while awarding artists for public relations skills instead of daring. But two points must be emphasized here. First, accessibility is not the parent of mediocrity; one does not have to “dumb down” art or avoid challenging content to be accessible. Second, speaking concurrently with many potential publics, some specialized and others nonspecific, is quite different than talking at a single, monolithic audience. An accessible conversation is not necessarily simple-minded. This chapter examines how various artists interrogate the persistent conventions of public art; by no means is this an encyclopedic overview, but rather a populist lens through which to view and reorient our appreciation for such art. To this end, one need put aside preconceived notions and qualitative judgments centered on aesthetic issues, and consider that art is most fully public when it sincerely extends emotional and intellectual access to its viewers. This is not to say that aesthetics or physical accessibility does not matter, but that they are, at times, beside the point.

Art as Monument, Art as Memorial

A monument seeks to celebrate. It offers a physical manifestation to mark a military victory or depict a cultural hero, for example, and its tone is most often congratulatory and triumphant. A memorial aims to commemorate. Expressing loss from war or disease, or remembering a tragic or profound event, a memorial provides opportunities to reflect and grieve, and may or may not result in built form. In his study of Holocaust memorials, James Young defines the “art of public memory” as extending beyond aesthetics to include activities that bring memorials “into being, the constant
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give-and-take between memorials and viewers, and, finally, the responses of viewers to their own world in light of a memorialized past.” Public memory also encompasses the “ebb and flow of public sentiment and will.” Instead of a collective, monolithic memory, Young argues for “collected memory”; aggregate in construction, plural in meanings, and mutable in form and context. This “collected memory” is comprised of diverse and competing responses, some planned and others accidental, which shift with time, circumstance, and ideology as they converge at each site. Even when socially constructed values and a sense of common history are shared, he insists one’s memories are unique and discrete. Thus, “neither a purely formal nor a historicist approach accommodates the many other dimensions at play in public monuments.” Young concludes that memorial spaces are not permanent “witness-relics,” but “forever incomplete” and “fundamentally interactive”; inert until visitors imbue them with memory (1999: 58, 69; 1993: vii–xii, 3, 6, 15).

Among his “10 Propositions” on modern public sculpture Albert Elsen observed there remained a need for memorials to perform conventional functions, but that the monument’s nature had changed. Instead of glorifying a particular person or place, contemporary monuments focused on more generalized celebrations of “art and life” (1989b: 291). For example, the work of Claes Oldenburg caters to a broad public, employing recognizable objects from daily life, but challenging our preconceptions about these with witty plays on scale and material. Oldenburg was among the earliest members of the Pop Art movement, which sought to counter art world pretensions with vernacular subject matter. He rendered hard objects soft (Ghost Typewriter is essentially a floppy bean bag), and edible food indigestible (Two Cheeseburgers with Everything is cast in paper-mâché). In his hands modestly proportioned items became gigantic totems (a cherry-topped spoon acts as a human-scale bridge). But beyond these more obvious shifts, Oldenburg’s works proffer subtle references and ironies for those seeking further analysis, as attested to by the multitude of conversations one can overhear in earshot of these. His Clothespin (1976), an enormous sculpture of the household item sited across the street from Philadelphia’s City Hall, is available to viewers on multiple levels of recognition and inquiry. It is a quickly apprehended joke on the

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absurdity of a handheld object expanded to a height of 45 feet, or a commentary on the state of political affairs, gingerly held together. And it will eventually become a reminder of domesticity past, when people regularly hung out their wash. Clothespin also acknowledges the nearby Philadelphia Museum of Art’s collection of Constantin Brancusi’s sculpture, literally mimicking the reductive form and lovers’ embrace in The Kiss. Through such multivalent readings, Oldenburg extends a wide invitation. His work is populist not only in form – working with familiar objects – but in intent and context. The artist does not impose a single interpretation upon any imagined homogenous audience, but keeps meaning free-flowing, without privileging one level of understanding over another.

Though many writers have scrutinized Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial (1982), the work’s ability to connect with wide and varied audiences deserves consideration here. Lin’s commission came through an open competition, the guidelines of which stipulated that entries were to be reflective and contemplative in nature; make no political statements; harmonize with the site (The Mall, Washington, DC); and include the names of Americans dead, missing, or captured as a result of the Vietnam War. Lin conceived a subdued minimalist form; two 240-foot walls bearing a painfully long list of 58,476 names. These are etched into polished black granite, which acts as a mirror reflecting images of the living upon names of the dead. Viewers literally descend into the earth, are engulfed by the names, and then rise up again. In a sense the memorial is both a massive tombstone and a scar testifying to our wounded past.

Tom Finkelpearl describes the Veterans Memorial as “both more personal and more abstract than the traditional memorial,” imbued with “an aura of fact” (2001: 111). Lin’s stated aim was to present the “facts” without dictating interpretation. But despite her efforts to avoid sentimentalism and political commentary, the memorial frankly lays bare the cost of war and the magnitude of its losses. Lin’s work quietly sits in its corner plot, sunken into the ground, unlike its imposing neighbors on The Mall rising triumphantly into the air. The World War II Memorial designed by architect Friedrich St. Florian (2004) emphasizes victory, though it ironically resembles one of Albert Speer’s starkly grand designs for Hitler. It also suggests that the war’s scale dictated the size of its monument. Sited
on a prime piece of The Mall, it attempts to forge collective remembrance of national history rather than offer an “art experience.” Here a noisy, indeed festive, atmosphere is created by a jumbled congregation of fountains, sculpture, architecture, and text. People take pictures of themselves next to the “memorial” (I have never seen this occur at Lin’s Veterans Memorial); another tourist site to check off the list. In contrast, Lin allows the unsettling, unfinished nature of the Vietnam War to persist. Despite its public setting, Lin conceived her memorial not as a “billboard,” but as a “book” for intimate reading (Finkelpearl 2001: 121). This prompts individual contemplation, and her viewers respond with reverence, as if visiting a public cemetery of personal grief. Though Lin was purposefully subtle in her aesthetic choices (Lin 2005: simple typeface, reflective stone, dark hue, and a gradual descent into the ground; experienced together these are less than neutral. It is not these choices alone, but the mood of quiet meditation they evoke, and our ability to interact with the work, that accounts for the memorial’s populist appeal.

Before Lin’s work was installed it prompted great controversy. Veterans in particular were cynical about its supposedly anti-war sentiments, characterizing it as a “black ditch” and “An Asian Memorial for an Asian War” (Finkelpearl 2001: 118, 123). They were also skeptical about the artist, a female college student in her early twenties who had never fought in combat. Neoconservative forces headed by James Watt (then Secretary of the Interior) and Ross Perot (a wealthy businessman with his own political aspirations) succeeded in placing a more “traditional” monument just 100 feet away, though thankfully not at the apex of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial as was initially suggested. This is Frederick Hart’s Three Fighting Men (1984), a representational bronze of over-life-size soldiers, primarily paid for by Perot. (In 1993 Glenna Goodacre’s overly dramatic Vietnam Women’s Memorial was installed nearby, which depicts two nurses attending a wounded GI, while a third keeps watch for a helicopter.) Hart’s sculpture “lacks the emotional wallop” of Lin’s memorial (Appar 1992: 28), and receives far less attention. As Thomas Crow aptly noted, the “self-appointed defenders of popular virtue” wrongly assumed the public would find Lin’s abstraction incomprehensible, when in fact it “exactly corresponds to the emotional needs of the ‘average’ mourners” (1996: 149). Lin’s commission came about through the efforts of Ian Scruggs (a former army corporal), who established the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Committee. Though the memorial’s siting on Washington’s Mall required Congressional approval, it was paid for with private contributions, many from individual veterans and members of the public (Kelly 1996: 18). After its installation Lin’s work was quickly embraced by “an unusually diverse public” (Miles 2004: 108), and remains enormously popular, being one of the most visited sites in Washington. (The universality of its language is confirmed by the proliferation of memorials that adopted its style in hopes of evoking similar responses.) Viewer reactions to the memorial, even above the artist’s intent, attest to its publicness. Visitors regularly leave mementoes as they might at gravesites, and touch the memorial or make rubbings of the names, as though their loved ones’ spirits reside here. Yet one does not need to have personally known someone named on the wall to be struck by the enormity of loss. Regardless of one’s feelings about the war, Lin’s memorial can be “profoundly moving” (Appar 1992: 27).

W. J. T. Mitchell perceived a duality in Lin’s work: “It can be experienced both as an object of national mourning and reconciliation that is absolutely inclusive, embracing and democratic, and as a critical parody and inversion of the traditional war memorial” (1990: 3). But in Michael Kelly’s estimation, there is no parody here. He insists Lin’s memorial offers a “politically astute” approach that considers Americans’ ambivalence toward this war, and thus wisely seeks no consensus (1996: 19–20). The artist suggests her memorial is the “anti-monument” (Lin 2005), which is perhaps why it is able to elicit mourning for both national and personal losses. Lin’s receipt of this prestigious commission is significant. Had entrants’ identities been revealed during the jurying process it is unlikely that Lin—an Asian-American undergraduate studying architecture at Yale University—would have been selected. Yet she was an ideal choice for the job; rather than spouting personal beliefs or letting “specific politics… get in the way of looking at the sacrifices made by individual veterans,” she focused on “the human response” to and “psychological understanding” of war. Lin’s impulses to avoid sensationalism, invite personal interaction, and trust
“the viewer to think” without leading her to specific conclusions (Lin qtd. in Finkelparl 2001: 116, 119) are consummately populist ones. Young observed that “in the absence of shared beliefs or common interests” memorials can “lend a common spatial frame to otherwise disparate experiences and understandings” of a “fragmented populace” (1993: 6-7). Lin’s *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* has accomplished precisely that, allowing visitors to share in a resonant experience rather than a single memory.

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**Excerpts from: Public Art (Theory, Practice and Populism) by Cher Krause Knight**

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**Conventional Wisdom**

After decades of complaints that much “public art” had little to do with the public, art’s functionality gained a renewed emphasis, with street furniture becoming standard public art fare. Such utilitarianism held particular appeal for Americans, characterized as indigenously pragmatic (Doezeza 1977: 14). As Harriet Senie asserted, the public is often an “involuntary audience” for public art, forced to negotiate a seemingly hostile or incomprehensible “foreign object” intruding upon its “familiar turf” (1992a: 240). Conversely, while waiting for a bus, one appreciatively sits on a nearby bench, usually unconcerned with who made it or any other functions it might serve. Despite David Joselit’s lament that “artist-designed furniture” can beget “bland practice that relegates artists to the role of superior park-bench designers” (1989: 131), that conceived by Scott Burton avoids banality without compromising distinctive style. The furniture he placed in city streets and neighborhood parks may frequently go unacknowledged by its users as “art,” but this circumstance was acceptable to the artist. Perceptive of the distinctions and similarities between the utilitarian object and objet d’art, Burton produced work that was equally at home on a street and in a museum. Burton’s sculpture-furniture was informed by his background as an art historian and critic who wished to speak plainly to audiences. In particular, he was influenced by Bauhaus designers like Marcel Breuer, who intended to make “good design” available to the public. Thus Burton made art welcoming instead of intimidating. For example, he transformed the self-reflexive condition of

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**Populist Intentions within Established Paradigms**

Minimlist art into newfound social and utilitarian purposes. While maintaining Minimalism’s “architectonic clarity,” he also coaxed humanistic “charisma” and accessibility from his pristine shapes (R. Smith 1978: 138-9). The directness of Burton’s form and function is certainly populist, especially as he opened up the interpretation of his works by seeing upon their double lives. Unornamented minimalist rhetoric is rendered in luxurious, meticulously worked materials. His pieces are publicly sited but profoundly intimate, meant to be experienced through direct, individual body contact. They are available to the passerby, yet only affordable to the wealthy collector. A chair is not just a chair but a representation of such, offering a tension between the sensual aesthetic object and the functional one. Burton was unwilling to let his work reside within the confines of categorical distinctions: furniture or art, private or public.

Some of Burton’s most “public” works were sponsored by private patronage. His first corporate commission came from the Equitable Life Assurance Society of America, and highlights the coming together of private and public, corporate and cultural ambitions. Equitable Center (Equitable’s new building was to connect to Paine Webers; together they would occupy a full city block in midtown Manhattan) attested to the rise of “privately owned public spaces” like hotel and office lobbies. In New York these were spurred by “incentive zoning” instituted in 1961, which offered floor area bonuses and zoning concessions to developers providing public spaces. As planner Jerold Kayden admits, not all privately owned public spaces are well designed, inviting, or as accessible as they are legally obligated to be. But when they are mindfully conceived, as was the attempt at Equitable Center, they can forge lively, interactive places (2000). Equitable Center was budgeted at 200 million dollars with over 7 million earmarked for the purchase and commission of artwork. This vast art program was a public relations move, and an attempt to enhance the real estate value and marketability of the site (Stephens 1986: 118). But the powers that be at Equitable were neither uninterested in art, nor reduced it to decorative baubles. Expected to serve as an aesthetic and social fix, art was to make the site more palatable to the “right kind of people” and less interesting to the “wrong kind.” Of course, this notion is deeply flawed, both in premise and practice. While we can expect that
architectural planning. Yet he became convinced that artists should be involved throughout the conception of a space, and thus accepted an invitation to collaborate at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). In addition to its percent-for-arts program, the school held a National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) matching grant for its Wiesner Building (1979–85), which was to house both arts and media technology programs. According to Wiesner project director Kathy Halbreich, the plan was to challenge the notion of “art in architecture” with an integrative approach that brought artists into the evolving design process (1984: 56). A visual arts committee and the architect, I. M. Pei, selected artists and assigned them particular “zones” in which to execute their work. The Wiesner project was marked by tensions, conflicting sensibilities, and successive rounds of give-and-take compromise between participants. Of the original six artists, only three stayed on: Richard Fleischner, who designed the exterior courtyard’s paving, seating, and plantings; Kenneth Noland, who conceived color bands that enlivened the building’s exterior and interior surfaces; and Burton, who focused on the interior’s stairway, railings, and lobby furnishings. Burton’s Aviary: Aviary (1985) are so thoroughly integrated with the building they could be overlooked, yet their forms prompted Pei to modify his original design for the interior balconies. But despite the image of a “nonhierarchical creative union,” Pei and his associates clearly wielded the most power (Graves 1993).

At Battery Park City (BPC), a waterside redevelopment project in New York City (see Chapter 6), the power balance was more equal. Burton joined forces with fellow artist Siah Armajani, architect Cesar Pelli, and landscape architect M. Paul Friedberg to collaboratively design a vast plaza fronting the World Financial Center (the BPC’s largest public space). Armajani’s contributions may be the most conspicuous; railings bearing quotations about New York by Walt Whitman and Frank O’Hara. But Burton’s Granite Benches, whose curvature echoes the water’s edge, seem most used. (His Plaza Seating, a grouping of tables, chairs, and steps, is too diminutive in the space.) No doubt, this art-as-amenity can get lost in its environment, leading Peter Boswell to decry the “common banality” of “art by committee,” typified by such plazas (1991). But Ken Johnson found the BPC plaza a welcome relief: “It doesn’t muscle you with the authoritative rhetoric of the premodern monument; it doesn’t flaunt an ostentatious individuality; it doesn’t nag you in the ideologically corrective way of the contemporary activist public art” (1990: 219). Burton once remarked that his work was “a rebuke to the art world,” which had neglected its social responsibilities (Burton qtd. in Princen 1987: 131). Though some might complain that his art was too expensive or subtle to be truly public, Nancy Princen maintains that Burton was genuinely populist: he enhanced the relationship between art and life without being conciliatory (1987: 131, 133–4, 136). Burton’s most public achievement was not to make everyone happy, but to provide amenities that were no less thoughtful than they were functional.

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**Start here**

The cultivation of land for human enjoyment is millennia-old, as is the recognition of art’s ability to frame nature, not just adorn it. By the latter twentieth century parks devoted to the display of art proliferated, one of the best-known being Storm King Art Center in Mountainville, New York, founded in 1960 by two businessmen. At Storm King (which hosts over 400 large outdoor sculptures), the land was reconfigured to suit the art (Dempsey 2006: 62), and “gargantuan welded steel works, initially intended for urban plazas, were put out to pasture much to their benefit” (Boswell 1991). This era also witnessed the popularization of land reclamation projects, which sought to rehabilitate spoiled nature through art. As artist Robert Morris observes, such projects were expected to “fulfill a kind of sanitation service” and “wipe away technological guilt” or “at the very least,” produce “tidy, mower-free” parks (1992: 259–60). But by co-opting the respective strategies of art park and reclaimed space, Christo and Jeanne-Claude, and Nancy Holt, were able to enliven their staid conventions.

Installation pieces have become common fixtures of public art, but rarely do they attain the notice and popular acclaim of those by husband-and-wife team Christo and Jeanne-Claude. With The Gates...
Conventional Wisdom

(1979–2005, it took 26 years to gain approval), New York’s beloved Central Park became a massive, temporary art park. For 16 days, 7,503 individual gates, vinyl armatures hung with swags of “saffron”-hued cloth, meandered through 23 miles of park paths. The enormity of such undertakings requires Christo and Jeanne-Claude to navigate an expanded sphere of political officials, local citizens, and project workers. As a result their work “presses esthetic issues to their social context…A position must be taken not just by art folk but by the immediate public…(which) is not a consequence of the work but its primary motivation.” (O’Doherty 1981: 337).

Despite the artists’ relationship to Central Park as longtime New Yorkers, and their sensitivity to the site (inspired by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux’s initial plans, which included functional gates to secure the park at night), Jeffrey Kastner found their work to be nostalgically decorative. He likens The Gates to “plop art…whose hulking forms seemed parachuted into place,” lamenting their “failure of imagination” both politically and aesthetically (2005). I would counter that while not the most nuanced of these artists’ gestures, The Gates was aesthetically effective, enacting an arresting study of contrasts. Their rectilinear forms played against the park’s undulating contours, while the tendency to take in the project as a sweeping mass was undercut by the strong visual presence of each individual gate. The fabric, undisturbed and opaque, looked quite different when aloft with the wind or shot through with light, and the neutral palette of a New York winter was punctuated by emphatic color. Christo and Jeanne-Claude reinvented an iconic space and then, by quickly returning it to its former state, enlarged its meaning to include the memory of their work.

The Gates was a populist triumph as public art, even if aesthetics are set aside. Many people did not like the look of The Gates, complaining that it was too sprawling, and the “saffron” fabric was more like the hue of a traffic cone. But what nearly everyone—the art world, city residents, tourists, and the mainstream media—agreed upon was that The Gates could not be ignored. Demanding our attention, the work was “a genuine cultural phenomenon, an uncanny hiatus in New York’s life as usual,” which succeeded in wooing not only sightseers but many citizens of the “most expertly blasé city in the world” (Kastner 2005). It is fair to ask whether...
Conventional Wisdom

land, and sky (Hall 1983: 29). In the Rosslyn neighborhood project, holes piercing the spheres and a pipe embedded into the landscaped berm frame vistas inward toward the artwork and outward on its surroundings. The larger portion of the park that abuts the office tower is actually more intimate, organic, human-scaled, and topographically variegated than photographs suggest. These often make the park look sterile, as if it descended upon its site rather than being nestled into its sloping nook. The spheres and metal poles set across the street on the traffic island are less effective; though they connect forms across space, they are isolated and less welcoming. The poles seem discordant with the rest of the design, and a tangle of electric boxes and traffic lights become unwitting participants in the piece. In an effort to merge “historical time” and the “cyclical time of the sun” (Broude 1991: 79), Holt marked the shadows cast by these spheres and poles permanently on the ground. These align with the actual shadows cast each year on August 1, 9:32 a.m., the exact moment in 1860 when the town’s founder acquired the land. But without prior knowledge of this astronomical effect, or reading the explanatory plaque, visitors to the park would be hard pressed to make the connection.

Yet the efficacy of Holt’s design is at least partly due to her willingness to create “situations” rather than provide “monolithic abstractions,” producing work that “fuses with” rather than occupies its site. As Joan Marten describes it, “Holt involves the visitor in a total spatial experience . . . as the viewer moves through the park, the work unfolds and discloses itself, and he or she experiences the nature of perception” (1989: 315–16). In fact, the artist was mindful of her audience throughout the process; she presented her previous work at public meetings and solicited area residents’ input about “their desires for the site,” before presenting her plan to local officials for approval. Holt’s park is not merely a host for the art, but the art itself, even though it might not always be recognized as such. Families play there, the kids running without hesitation all over its contours, enjoying a park rather than reverently admiring art.

I concur with John Beardsley – this is a worthwhile trade-off. Holt’s “concessions to intellectual and psychological accessibility” are likely to inspire continued appreciation for a place that otherwise would have remained abandoned (Beardsley 1981b: 45).

Populist Intentions within Established Paradigms

Art as the Agora

In the ancient Greek agora, a public square and marketplace that fostered political conversation and social interactions, American society found a metaphor for democracy and a model for its commons. According to Jürgen Habermas, the spirit of the agora was inherited by the bourgeoisie of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, private individuals who debated public issues, allowing the merit of the arguments rather than the identities of their proponents to determine the outcome (1962). Of course, the participants in this discussion comprised a limited group, much more so than our public sphere of today. Alan McKee suggests that with the development of modern social organization the private and public spheres have evolved as “separate from the people who inhabited them – something that you could move into and out of” (2005: 35). For numerous critics the current situation is worrisome, marked by concerns that the commons is being “increasingly displaced by an exaggerated private domain.” Although architect Peter Calthorpe acknowledges the commons’ essential role as marketplace, he frets that commercial purposes have eclipsed social ones, particularly in the formation of community and identity (1993: 23). Likewise, Mark Dery fears the mall’s food court, “themed-parked for mass consumption,” will displace the public commons and quell its democratic functions (1999: 171, 179). But as W. J. T. Mitchell suggests, such bleak views are countered by one in which the globalization of culture and evolution of technology create solidarity or offer “new forms of public resistance to homogenization and domination” (1990: 2). Witness the rise of “culture jamming,” which reinterprets popular media by making guerrilla-style modifications of it (Thompson and Sholley 2004: 13). Culture jamming has its foundations in grass-roots activism, but utilizes technology (especially the internet) as a means of wide dissemination. For example, groups such as HackThisSite and the Electro Hippies Collective practice “hacktivism”; employing computer hacking skills to undermine what they consider to be unfair or usurious corporate practices. The goal is “to change the way that people think about the world by playing with existing
culture,” in hopes of increasing political awareness if not necessarily inciting change (McKee 2005: 172–4).

Perhaps public art’s noblest function is to nurture participatory citizenship, to create an unfettered intellectual space for debate and socio-political engagement that is not necessarily tied to a physical place. Phillips insists that public art can happen literally anywhere, and take any form; it provides a forum rather than occurs in one (1988: 93–4). She described this forum as the “mental landscape of American public life,” which permits “dynamic, often conflicting expressions” and can even be “the space of dissent” (1992: 298).

Although the commons can indeed assume many forms, its recent digital manifestations, which reinforce egalitarianism, are the focus here. Cyberspace extends social networks with the potential for knitting together individual lives from far-flung corners of the world in a single instant. The internet usurps not only geographic borders, but many socio-cultural ones as well (minus the important exception of economic barriers that preclude ownership of or access to a computer). As such it constitutes a domain for unregulated exchange in which intimately private moments are made available for public consumption. The private home has long been a site for public action, and can bridge the gap between these spheres. Sitting alone in a living room watching a popular television program, one still partakes in a shared social experience. When a person uses a computer, she acts individually, but participates in a collectively cultivated, community space: blogging, surfing websites, visiting chat rooms, or posting comments on discussion boards. Miriam Rosen described the internet as a space which is not a place,” though it invites personalization through our navigations and modifications of it. By the mid 1990s she insisted that “it no longer makes sense to speak of a viewer or even a spectator”; on the internet everyone is an active “user,” charting her own itinerary (1996: 87, 95).

Artists who use the internet not just as a conduit for their art, but as a medium in its own right challenge the conventional art world, still resistant to change or unable to cope with the digital realm. Listening Post was created through collaboration between two “self-described computer geeks,” and uses the ubiquity of everyday communications on the internet as its media. In 2000 artist Ben Rubin, and Mark Hansen, a professor of statistics, were brought together by Bell Labs to experiment with the relationship between art and technology, the end result of which was Listening Post. The Post is composed of 231 miniature LED screens hung on an 11 by 21-foot curved grid. Although programmed to seek common phrases, its searches also yield random ones, gleaned from the endless network of real-time exchanges at any given moment on the web. These phrases are converted into sound through voice synthesizers, while being simultaneously displayed on the screens. The effect is hypnotic: disembodied words and sounds become repeating patterns. Though Listening Post calls material from the internet’s “public” spaces, it becomes “voyeuristic” when we realize these conversations were never intended for museum audiences. It seems fitting that the piece found a permanent home at the San José Museum of Art, in the heart of Silicon Valley (Clark 2006: 32–3), though its installation in a solitary gallery at the Whitney Museum of American Art was particularly evocative. But it is not sitting that makes the Post public; it is its content and manner of construction. Listening Post covertly buckles elitist art world pretensions. Though the artists defined its theoretical and physical frameworks, having written the program and designed the module of display, the continuously changing content is provided by unspecified internet users. What is happening in the news, their personal lives and private thoughts, or anything that compels them to comment on a bulletin board or in a chat room can become the art. Colette Gaiter asserts that the internet’s most “public” art is that which permits viewers to contribute in its authorship (1995). In the case of Listening Post members of the public become collaborators, if unwitting ones. Without their (inter)activity the project could not exist.

The GALA Committee’s In the Name of the Place (1995–8) offers another example of popular media’s ability to create and disseminate public art. The committee was spearheaded in 1995 by artist Mel Chin, who was then teaching at the University of Georgia, Athens, and had also been invited for an artist-in-residency at the California Institute of the Arts, a progressive art school outside of Los Angeles. Chin was asked by the Museum of Contemporary Art (MoCA, also in LA) to participate in its upcoming exhibition, Uncommon Sense (1997), which examined the intersections of contemporary art and public interaction. This invitation spurred Chin
to coordinate the efforts of faculty and students in Georgia and LA (hence the acronym GALA), and form a collaborative group which eventually included other artists and grew to 102 members. GALA adopted a slow, methodically “viral” approach to art placement, through which their works infiltrated “the organism of the television industry” (Dziewior 2000). According to Chin, “Eventually your host is the replicating agent” (Arning, Chin, Jacob, and Kwon 2006). In the Name of the Place used a highly popular TV series, Melrose Place, as its host. The show, produced by the Spelling Entertainment Group, was a catty, deliciously trashy primetime soap opera for which GALA produced some 150 site-specific props (Dexter 1997). These addressed hot-button social issues ranging from safe sex to political protest, and made their way into 300 scenes over two seasons. For example there were the Safety Sheets, bed linens printed with a funky pattern that upon closer inspection revealed itself to be unrolled condoms. (Images of unrolled condoms were not allowed to be shown on TV; however, the offending design was so subtle as to escape the notice of the Federal Communications Commission.) Fire Flies was a painting reminiscent of Ross Bleckner’s, but based on photographs of the bombing of Baghdad. Other props included a Chinese food take-out container, printed with slogans from the Tiananmen Square protest; and the RU/486 Quilt, which bore the chemical structure for the “morning-after pill.” Thus works of “high art” subversively entered the “lowbrow” culture of television soaps, and together they forged a new public art.

At first GALA initiated these actions. After screening advance copies of upcoming episodes, group members would create different props without claiming individual authorship. Members of the Melrose Place cast and crew were often unaware of these first interventions. But over time, some of the show’s set decorators, writers, and producers became GALA members, and began building plots around the objects. MoCA even became a location for one of the series’ episodes, in which the careful observer can see Chin, an “extra” in the background. In the Uncommon Sense exhibition, GALA was represented not only by the props, but Melrose Place video clips and a set from the series, “Shooters Bar,” which museum visitors could enter. In November 1998, the project culminated with the props being auctioned at Sotheby’s, Beverly Hills; the proceeds from this high-rent event were donated to educational charities.

Despite the disdain of many academics, TV is a commonly shared public space in our culture, and a viable host for public art. Since GALA did not moralize about this medium, the group was able to utilize it to powerful effect. Instead of TV being the antithesis of art, as it is often and unfairly categorized, GALA made TV the subject, medium, and means of distribution for its “fine” art. Joshua Dexter suggests that In the Name of the Place united two of conservatives’ favorite “scapegoats,” artists and the “popular but morally questionable TV show,” to create a highly evocative “new type of cultural fusion” (1997). In a way elitism still persists here; one needs to be an art world insider who knows GALA’s project, or a fan who has viewed enough Melrose Place reruns, to recognize and contextualize the artworks. But in another sense the project is quite egalitarian: anyone with a TV has the chance to uncover GALA’s embedded socio-political subtexts, which challenges stereotypical notions of the TV viewer’s passivity and limited intellect. A mainstream TV series, blamed for sensationalizing social issues to secure a young, hip audience, became the platform from which to treat such concerns seriously and disseminate them widely, even if the audience was unsuspecting or remained unaware. And with the worldwide syndication of the series, these issues may be explored across cultures and into perpetuity.

Stop here

Art as Pilgrimage

The term “pilgrimage” is perhaps too oft-used to describe art outings; traveling far distances to see famous works or visit renowned museums. But the kind of pilgrimage I have in mind is more rigorous, requiring greater effort and commitment from the pilgrim. Walter De Maria’s Lightning Field (1977; first opened to visitors in July 1978) fits the bill, transforming spectacle chasers into “pilgrims.” Blogger Todd Gibson, acknowledging the “cloak and dagger” circumstances required to visit “De Maria’s best known – but least
Chapter 3  Culture to Go: 
From Art World to 
The World

A museum can never be read as a single text. Even if we consider 
the most basic question of who or what museums are for, there is 
ever a unitary answer. (Jordanova 1989: 32-3)

Museums expose friction between the public and the private. While 
it's roots reach back to ancient Egypt and Greece (the 
*museum* being a sanctuary dedicated to the Muses), today's museum is the most closely descended from personal collections assembled in the last several centuries. These are embodied in the Renaissance 
*Kunstkammer*, literally an “art-cabinet” filled with aesthetic treasures, collected by those with power and privilege in order to demonstrate their mastery over and reach around the world (Duncan 1991: 93). By the end of the nineteenth century, Martha Ward contends, the developing art market and consumer culture steered art display, once “a civic form or public arena,” toward more privatized realms (1996: 456). But less than a century later this situation reversed itself with renewed focus on museums' public functions (Hein 2000: 144). Art museums, the focus of this chapter, have increasingly paid attention to issues of civic engagement, especially in the last decade or two, creating vastly more hospitable environments for their visitors as compared to the past. But while commendable, these efforts can nevertheless leave many potential visitors estranged, finding the museum off-putting, intimidating,
Excerpts from: Public Art (Theory, Practice and Populism) by Cher Krause Knight

Culture to Go

Boston, incorporated in 1870 by a state legislative act but founded with private funds from both the general public and wealthy benefactors. The MFA was dedicated to the “elevated enjoyment of all” (Rathbone 1984: 39–42), an “oasis of order and culture” especially for the working masses (Levine 1988: 201–2). The American museum’s private heritage and public mission intersect ironically: elite culture is preserved and made available to everyone (Wood 2004: 107–8). Clearly, the duality of the museum’s public face and privileged nucleus shall continue to coexist.

The public’s agency at the museum – much like populist intent in public art – is on the rise and garnering critical attention, particularly in the last 10 to 15 years. For Hein, late twentieth-century public art serves as a direct model upon which to recontextualize the museum. Though museums are now more consciously experiential and egalitarian, she notes many people still conceive them as “static structures,” lofty seats of universal, eternal values. She urges museums to adapt the dynamism of public art to their own purposes, embracing temporality, pluralism, participatory practices, social activism, and experimentalism, while being more self-critical (2006). Like Hein, I advocate for public agency at museums, although my purpose here is not to reconstitute the museum along the lines of a contemporary public art paradigm. Instead I aim to examine the museum’s publicness in broader terms, and more specifically as a potential site for public art. This chapter asks why the museum (and by extension the gallery) endures as the preeminent host for art, but remains under-utilized as a public art site. Is it merely a venue or an entrance fee that marks the distinctions between “art” and “public art”? If so, then how might the museum become part of public art’s expanded terrain? If not, can we better articulate genuine differences between public spaces and private institutions, or should we even try to renegotiate those boundaries? While there are all kinds of art museums, with a variety of missions, collections, and populations to serve, for many people the “museum” concept exists as a holistic entity. It is also true that while museums cater to wider patronage than ever before, providing more interactive, immersive experiences for these visitors, they are still likely to impose institutional agendas upon them, albeit often well-intended ones. Therefore this chapter offers some suggestions about how museums might become even better listeners, more fully responsive to and deeply involved with audiences. To do so, museums must further transcend public conceptions of them as monolithic enterprises, and enhance their role as independent social and aesthetic forces within individual communities. Patricia Phillips contends public space is widely “communal,” not the sole purview of local constituents; “psychological ownership” is not relegated to geography (1988: 94–95). On one hand, I most certainly agree. It is too easy a “solution” to say that community involvement surely begets a public art. But conversely, I shall emphasize the importance of community members being more directly engaged with their museums, especially by interacting more consistently and meaningfully with artists and museum staff.

At this juncture, a more expansive definition of “community” is necessary, which extends beyond geographical proximity to include shared values, traditions, or history that bind individuals into collective entities (Gee 1995: 62). We must also acknowledge the continual flux of “community,” and the dangers of becoming too regionally bound in its definition. Community participation does not automatically produce a public sphere of action. But investments of time and effort from both museums and their users can create mutually beneficial bonds, which likely stimulate more inclusive forums for exchange. Such inclusiveness does not equal a least-common-denominator approach to art, or require consensus in decision-making processes. Instead it means that more people feel welcome to ponder all kinds of artworks, even difficult ones, in a multitude of venues, including museums.

Artist Robert Morris once remarked; “If there is such a thing as public art, what then is private art? ... the term public art has come to designate works not found in galleries or museums (which are public spaces), but frequently in association with public buildings, and funded with public monies” (1992: 250). By isolating issues of location and funding, Morris points up faulty logic in the abiding criteria by which art is deemed “public.” If an artwork is placed where the public can come into physical contact with it without charge, then it is quickly categorized as “public.” But this simple formula privileges physical over intellectual and emotional accessibility; instead of conceiving these as three interrelated, mutually dependent components, it reduces art experiences to commercial transactions, or the lack thereof. It also ignores an inherent irony...
Morris underscores; museums are actually quite public places, and as Rosalyn Deutsche asserts, “socially constructed spaces” (1992: 159–60). It follows then that museums are rich potential sites – both physically and psychologically – for public art. Yet we continually segregate museums as discrete entities from other public sites; places like train stations and airports are perceived as more public than museums. In fact, the organization of and access to facilities in all of these is similar; at each, users enter a lobby-like space and move about with relative freedom, but to partake of services offered within – whether to utilize transportation or view art – we pay some sort of fee. Paradoxically, an openly “commercial” gallery is, in some ways, more thoroughly public. While it offers no pretense about its purpose to sell art, generally anyone is able, free of charge, to view its works. Although one may feel less welcome at or intellectually prepared for the gallery, it presents no inherent economic barriers to looking at art (buying is an entirely different situation). Likewise, despite museums’ perceived exclusivity, they provide actual spaces and cerebral fodder for exploring art, personal values, social issues, and civic responsibility; essential ingredients in defining public life.

A museum becomes most fully public when it prompts us to examine our aesthetic tastes, cultural beliefs, and social practices, and when a variety of visitors feel comfortable and properly equipped to actively partake in such investigations. To accomplish such lofty aims, museums and their respective publics must depend more upon one another, with both parties shaping institutional infrastructures and conceptual frameworks. If museums do not mold the public to their will but invite sustained participation in matters ranging from programming to operations, they can transform visitors into genuine partners with shared visions for the future. Powerful art experiences are not reserved for museum audiences (Senic 1989: 301), and conversely, public art is not relegated to city streets.
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as it was chosen by people who know about these things. Undoubtedly, educated museum professionals have a wealth of knowledge and experience, and museum-goers benefit enormously from their expertise. But specialized training does not cancel out the public’s subjective critical faculties. Art invites opinions, and insightful ones come from all kinds of people, not just those with a particular pedigree or background. Clearly art museums are not the public’s enemies, they are advocates. Yet “the museum” and “the public” have come to embody the perceived and actual struggles between elitist and popular culture (Rice 1992: 234–5).

The museum as a scholar’s “temple for culture,” coddled by modernist-era notions of exclusivity in which learned connoisseurs certified the genius of artists and the preciousness of their masterworks, has its purpose. But as public institutions, museums must make art accessible and personally relevant to ever broadening publics. Educational programs that “articulate and explicate” aesthetic criteria, rather than “establish or legislate” such would go a long way toward those ends (Senie 1992b: 227). Despite numerous, well-intended public relations overtures, which have expanded the sphere of museum audiences, many members of the public still feel intimidated by museums. Museums can effectively counter visitors’ insecurities and doubts about whom they serve. When they do so, the public is far less likely to perceive them as depositories “for things that are dead” (Weil 1990: 87), or snobby establishments discounting the everyday experiences of “ordinary” people.

From Art World to The World

actual communities.” Hal Foster replied to Crimp that this was a matter “not so much of sites as common ground” (Foster 1987: 47). Without an engaged, participatory visitorship personally invested in an institution’s livelihood, a museum is a hollow endeavor. Although Chapter 5 provides a broader discussion of proactive roles played by the public, here it is essential to consider visitors’ agency at museums. David Fleming suggests there exists “The Great Museum Conspiracy,” evidenced by a lack of social inclusion and cultural equality. This “conspiracy” manifests itself through several interrelated conditions: who runs museums; the manner in which, and for whom they are run; and what museums contain. He concludes that even when publicly funded, museums have been “private and exclusive clubs” for an educated, prosperous minority. Thus despite their public service missions, museums have historically functioned as “agents of social exclusion, and not by accident but by design” (2002: 213).

At museums many of the decisions are already made for us. This is not necessarily a bad thing, as most choices were arrived at thoughtfully, by highly trained, well-meaning professionals. Yet this fact may account for why some people still feel unwelcome at museums, despite all the colorful banners and docent tours that beckon them. Museums ought not to be content to build “large audiences of passive, leisure-time consumers” (Joselit 1990: 145), or assume preexisting publics (Breitbart and Worden 1993: 28). As Elaine Heumann Gurian observes, museum professionals often want to be inclusive of varied populations, but can do a poor job of serving them; “we demand that they accommodate us and then wonder why they do not visit our galleries.” She insists that her colleagues may, perhaps unwittingly, reinforce exclusive hierarchies of culture and knowledge. “If the audience ... feels alienated, unworthy, or out of place, I contend it is because we want them to feel that way” (1991: 176–7). Art professionals, especially museum directors, curators, and exhibition designers, must avoid any typecasting of the public as philistines, unable to digest what they see on their own. While the public can use guidance in understanding art, a museum is at its best a place to sharpen our critical faculties, not one where all of the analysis is done for us. Museum workers need to find additional ways to converse with visitors. Although many...
their aptitude: “To gain and keep the public’s trust we must not sell the public short” (2004: 116, 160, 168). In his impassioned plea for social inclusion, Fleming outlined an optimistic path for the museum’s future:

In creating a museum that inspires and uplifts people, that confronts them with ideas, that helps them understand a little more about themselves and their surroundings, you are doing the best a museum can do ... having this aim ... refutes the accusation that, in order to have widespread mass appeal the museum must ‘dumb down.’ Not so, not if you want to make a difference to people’s lives. (2002: 224)

It is neither obligatory nor feasible for museums to entice every individual to partake in their offerings; potential museum-goers must assume some liability if they reject or ignore museums on reactionary bases. But it is the responsibility of museums to extend sincere invitations to the public, and the public’s duty to make informed choices when accepting or declining these. The museum needs to lecture less at, and converse more with its audiences to build a sense of “shared ownership” (Spicer 1994), striving toward “an open dialogue from the start” that is “potentially ongoing, not prescribed to a simple exchange” (Gamble 1994: 22). Only after art museums better combat their elitist reputations, and their audiences overcome lingering apprehensions and anxieties, shall truly public exchanges take place between them.

Chapter 4  Not Quite “Art,” Not Quite “Public”: Lessons from the Private Sector

As public art was riding a crest of 1980s optimism, Peter Blake assessed its quality as follows:

The last time good public art was created, consistently, was when the world was run by princes and popes, who selected the artists to make the spaces. Ever since universal suffrage raised its ugly head, we have had nothing but trouble. The only good art being produced, nowadays, is private art—because nobody (except the buyer) ever votes on it. (1987: 287)

Blake’s statement is audacious, a nearly wholesale rejection of publicly conceived and funded art. Yet he also makes several astute points. First, the public realm is significantly enriched by private patronage. Second, holistic approaches in which artists “make the spaces” rather than isolated objects might best serve public art. Third, financial autonomy can heighten creative autonomy. While Blake seemed ready to discount the merit of contemporary public art, we ought not to be equally dismissive of the private sector’s potential contributions to such art. As Patricia Phillips contends, public art has an inherently private core: “The public is diverse, variable, volatile, controversial, and it has its origins in the private lives of all citizens. The encounter of public art is ultimately a private experience” (1992: 804).
Excerpts from: Public Art (Theory, Practice and Populism) by Cher Krause Knight

Not Quite “Art,” Not Quite “Public”

Throughout history, individual patrons have funded artworks in public places, for public purposes, or to express publicly held sentiments. Certainly many of these people had narrow tastes or were self-serving rather than truly philanthropic, yet it would be more than inaccurate to claim that no genuinely beneficial public gestures have come through private interests. In this country, as Stanley Katz observed, “Doing well by doing good is an old American tradition” (1984: 35). John Dewey agreed, noting that many private acts “contribute to the welfare of the community or affect its status and prospects” (1927: 13). By sharing their resources and enthusiasm for the arts, private patrons promote regional venues while widening their horizons, and furnish their towns with high-quality artworks. They can also support local or “undiscovered” artists, and provide opportunities for art encounters the public might not have otherwise. Stanley Marsh 3 (he deems “HIP” or “The Third” too pretentious), a wealthy and famously eccentric patron, offers a prime example of how provocative public art can be when freed from committee votes and public relations mandates. Though unconcerned about local consensus – in fact he seems intent on fostering controversy – Marsh is a community activist. Supplying his hometown of Amarillo, Texas, with art that cannot be easily ignored, he coax his neighbors to debate the nature and function of art in the public sphere. Cadillac Ranch (1974), designed by the artists’ collective Ant Farm, is the best known of Marsh’s commissions. Visible from a busy stretch of eastbound Interstate-40 are 10 classic Cadillacs embedded – nose down, fins up – into the ground, a jarring counterpoint to the land’s unyielding flatness. (In 1997 Cadillac Ranch was moved to a cow pasture two miles west of its original site to distance it further from the city limits.) A constant stream of visitors (tourists, art aficionados, and area residents) make pilgrimages to Cadillac Ranch, leaving their mark in spray-painted epitaphs on the readily accessible cars. On my last visit (fall 2006) there were many fresh graffiti tags from the day before, including that by a family for whom a visit to Cadillac Ranch became a “quality time” bonding experience. Exhausted spray cans are on the ground, and heaped in a large bin at the pasture’s entrance. But the tagging does not indicate a lack of regard for the artwork, in fact, it is welcomed. The graffiti is proof of Cadillac Ranch’s approachability and populist appeal. Instead of symbols of wealth and luxury, the Cadillacs are embraced as historic Americana. By forsaking their preciousness the cars become resolutely public, and the audience takes proprietary ownership of the art made for them, actually inscribing their names upon it. In this act Cadillac Ranch is not defaced, it is transformed into a civic mascot and popular shrine.

Marsh identifies himself as an artist, and often works with the Dynamite Museum (a collaborative of young local artists begun in 1992) to develop and fabricate his projects. Among the most visible of these are traffic signs placed throughout Amarillo and neighboring towns (some reports claim there are as many as 5,000 of them), each with a unique message. The Dynamite Museum worked with commercial companies to replicate the look of official street signage; diamond shapes sporting block-letters. But their signs bear entertaining, infuriating, or puzzling images and texts, often poking fun at art history’s staid conventions. A “low” mode of communication, the traffic sign, is appropriated to make “high”-minded commentary (Fig. 2). Examples include, “MY YOUTH IS SPENT AND YET I AM NOT OLD,” and “HE’S EITHER A MADMAN OR A POET,” which both seem to refer to Marsh. The signs are not randomly placed; they are installed on private property per owners’ requests, though are clearly visible for all to see (Cowley 2001). Art insiders cruise the streets of Amarillo in a sort of treasure hunt, seeking signs that are often owned by those outside the art world’s orbit. Thus the signs invert the socio-economic structures that usually govern art ownership: Marsh’s personal funds provide free, original artworks to members of the public, which are placed not in city squares but at individual homes. An owner may take a sign with her if she moves, or have it removed for free if she no longer wants it. The signs appear in all kinds of settings, from Amarillo’s wealthier to poorer neighborhoods, from the manicured lawn to a liquor store parking lot. Some are tailored specifically to owners; a sign reading “ART’s exalted character clears my brain” appears on the property of an art teacher. Not all requests for a sign were granted; Marsh and his minions decided who was worthy, establishing a new caste system; instead of economic clout or your family tree, one’s appreciation for the arts, hipness, or endorsement of Marsh’s antics was awarded. (Marsh and the Dynamite Museum
stopped making the signs a few years ago, and now refer inquiries to a custom sign company.) Amarillo, a ranching community not known for cutting-edge art, has been enlivened, entertained, irritated, and enriched by the eccentricity of Marsh and his projects. Though Marsh sidesteps many conventional public art processes (community boards, permits, fundraising), his projects are fundamentally egalitarian, widening art’s audiences. Freed from the constraints of social status and money, people who might have never lived with art now own it.

In Chapter 2 we examined a more standard form of corporate patronage, in which the Equitable Life Assurance Society established its own art collection, hiring professional consultants and employing traditional collection management techniques. In this chapter we turn to circumstances in which the private sphere takes the creative lead, and consider what public art might learn from these endeavors. The entertainment industry is able to bridge imaginative thinking and built reality to create themed environments or UEDs (urban entertainment destinations, as termed by sociologist John Hannigan). UEDs are often immersive environments: instead of audiences negotiating around independent objects, they traverse through enveloping settings. These spaces can cultivate highly experiential relationships with visitors, predicated on participatory interaction, not passive viewership. This chapter prompts readers to expand their definitions of “public art” by including works and places few might consider “public” or “art” at all, which were conceived in the private sector. This is not a matter of redrafting the entire map of public art’s terrain but rather adjusting some of its boundaries, which requires us to frame our larger culture as a network of shared and meaningful experiences, instead of a series of “popular” but passing fads of limited quality and substance. Such an approach dismantles some presiding assumptions about the depth and value of consumer culture, and asks us to put aside preconceived notions about places like casinos and theme parks.

Within the private sector are powerful visions and great ingenuity, as well as troubling shortcomings; each helps chart a more populist path for public art. In assessing the history of the American commons, Phillips asserts that it “existed to support the collate of private interests that constitutes all communities, to articulate and not diminish the
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dialectic between common purpose and individual free wills.” She reminds us that the public and private domains are interdependent entities, whose “textures” are defined through their functions as “foil” and “complement” to each other (1988: 94; 1992: 296, 298–9). George Yudice argues that the arts, threatened by drastic funding cuts, have become entrepreneurial. Noting that the “public good” is now negotiated between the government, private sector, and civil society, he remarks; “It makes no sense to speak of public and private, for they have been pried open to each other” (1999: 26, 29).

The Art of Entertainment

In Fantasy City Hannigan outlines the rise of a “culture of pastiche” with UEDs (theme parks and restaurants, casinos, interactive rides, megaplex cinemas, and so forth) designed for “entertainment consumption” that often emphasize visitor participation. Their roots are in a “golden age” of popular urban entertainments (amusement parks, cabarets, sports stadiums, and the like) that flourished in this country from the end of the nineteenth century until the onset of the Depression. Hannigan argues that these entertainments’ developers promoted a view of a public culture that was “attractive, non-threatening and affordable” to a wide cross-section of society, implying that a “good-natured crowd” of different classes would peacefully coexist within “democracy’s theater.” While social tensions actually persisted, these early entertainments did energize their cities. Likewise, many of today’s UEDs were built as redemptive spectacles to reinvigorate staled regional economies, especially as the manufacturing base faltered across the United States (Hannigan 1998: 1–2, 15–30). Although critics decry the “release from ‘real’ identities and responsibilities – from the serious stuff of everyday social life” that occurs at places like casinos and theme parks (Lolland 1998: 94), these sites are resonant components of American culture and potentially exciting, though unlikely, art venues. They are frequently proactive, site-specific environments that can be framed as art experiences, and are more welcoming to the general public than many traditional public artworks. Since we do not commonly think of themed environments as art

places, and they employ broadly comprehended references, people generally feel less intimidated by and more willing to avail themselves of the varied experiences they offer. At museums, art “floats in its own bathysphere” or is seen in “a situation of seeming alienation” (Stephens 1986: 123); at themed environments artfulness is integral to the total concept. Museums present art in an intensified context of reverent protection, while art in our city squares and streets may seem like afterthoughts easily ignored. But in a themed place all facets (the space, furnishings, decorations, props, food, and activities) are interrelated to produce unified, coherent experiences rather than fragmented ones. Hilde Hein commented that “experiences grow stale” as “their shelf life is brief and the cost of refreshing them enormous” (2000: 147); yet these places repeatedly provide fulfilling experiences for many patrons. It would be astute for anyone interested in public art to discern this power rather than discount its relevance and import.

All of the “art” produced at these venues is not of the highest aesthetic or intellectual caliber, but as Marcel Duchamp proclaimed, “art may be bad, good or indifferent, but, whatever adjective is used, we must call it art, and bad art is still art in the same way that a bad emotion is still an emotion” (1957: 818). Likewise Arthur Danto argues, “It is possible that a work might be good public art though bad or indifferent as art, which would then make esthetic criteria irrelevant to the matter” (1987: 91). Although I do not wish to segregate “public art” from “art,” nor do I think aesthetic criteria are “irrelevant,” there are times when such criteria ought to play supporting roles. Even when themed environments are smartly conceived and artfully designed, their detractors claim they are lowbrow entertainments sidestepping weighty social issues. But entertaining the public, providing opportunities for enjoyment, amusement, and relaxation, is no meager goal. Nor must art be “enlightening” at every turn; some of the least satisfying art experiences are those with a heavy-handed didactic or moralizing tone, which treat viewers as if they are sorely in need of guidance. Yet for critics like Michael Sorkin, the popularity of themed environments is irritating and even threatening. He fears that time and space become obsolete in such locales, and the “genuine particularity” of place is eradicated along with any of its attendant social relations. Sorkin worries that a new kind of city has emerged, focused on
consumerism at the expense of democracy. Such a city sports the appearance of endless choices, yet a relentless sameness persists—“a generic urbanism inflected only by appliqué” (1992: xi-xv).  

In the legendary essay, “Travels in Hyperreality,” Umberto Eco chronicled his travels throughout the US, dubbing it an “America of furious hyperreality” with a pronounced taste for well-crafted simulations. He suggests that precise re-creations (such as the replicated Oval Office at the Lyndon B. Johnson Library, Austin, Texas) function as “absolute fakes,” blurring boundaries between reality and imitation, history and reenactment, original and simulacrum. The replica achieves “immortality” through “duplication” as a “full-scale authentic copy ... not the image of the thing, but its plaster cast.” But at the theme park and casino there is no attempt to fool us with simulacrums as “a substitute for reality, as something even more real,” or quell our desire for the “original.” Eco is right that the theatricality of these places is meant to stimulate consumption (1975: 6-8, 19, 41-43), but most visitors can quickly perceive the commercialism and make active choices about their levels of participation. In fact, they revel in their abilities to distinguish references to the “real thing” from the thing itself. Themed places tweak simulations with shifts in scale, media, geography, and context while heightening the kitsch factor, so that no actual confusion between the “original” and their versions can exist. As Hamigan surmised, we “‘switch codes’: participating in a simulated experience and then stepping back and examining the technologies whereby the illusion is achieved” (1998: 69). Rather than spectacle collapsing with cognition of its apparatuses (Saunders 2005: viii), its pleasure is enhanced by our apprehension of it. UEDs provide alternative environments that are inspired by, though not “plaster casts” of, their source material; they do not kill our taste for “genuine” history as frequently charged. I imagine few visitors to the scaled-down Eiffel Tower at Las Vegas’ Paris Hotel and Casino, or those who visit the France sector of Disney’s Epcot Center, now feel they can confidently check Paris off of their lists of “Places to See.”  

As Andrew Ross contends, popular culture holds meaning for its users, helping to create “political identities, by rearticulating desires that have a deep resonance in people’s daily lives.” Instead of viewing members of the public as consumers manipulated by government, the media, and culture industries, Ross posits we conceive them as experts in their own culture, making informed choices (1989: 52, 148, 232). Alan McKee agrees, suggesting academics are suspicious of entertainment because they fear it threatens the public sphere by encouraging “intellectual laziness.” Scholars perceive culture that is readily accessible as “worthless, because it doesn’t require audiences to make an effort to understand it.” To make his point, McKee contrasts modernist and postmodernist approaches to culture. He describes modernists as passing “universal judgments” about quality, believing that debased culture is forced on the working classes. For modernists, the means to cultural equality is through established routes of formalized education. On the other hand, postmodernists practice “cultural relativism,” assessing each culture on its own terms, with popular culture being as valid as any other. McKee argues in favor of the postmodernist method, affirming that popular audiences “don’t passively accept what they’re given” but are intellectually curious and proactive: “They interpret (culture) in their own ways and make unexpected uses of it” (2005: 82-7). I concur with McKee. An instructive lead may be taken from the iconic book, Learning from Las Vegas (Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour 1972). The book was written after its authors, a trio of architects, took a group of Yale graduate students to Vegas in 1968. They celebrated the city’s vernacular, even when it lapsed in “good design,” and reconstituted pluralist architecture as inclusive, allusive, witty, and meaningful. As such their book offered a populist antidote to rampant modernist pretension without arguing for a dumbed-down culture (Knight 2002), a sentiment which is as resonant today as it was then both for academics and the public at large. As Lucy Lippard once observed, while art is “not just entertainment ... it doesn’t hurt to entertain people while you’re having your say” (1989: 218).
and theme parks; audiences purposefully travel to specific locations at their own financial expense because they believe the experiences awaiting them will be rewarding and worth the trouble, that the designated place is somehow extraordinary. A city square is resolutely communal; all are invited, and yet we may feel unenthused or ambivalent about it, as if it would persist whether or not we were there. But a private space, which may charge a fee that conveys a sense of status, can feel both exceptional and hospitable; outside of our daily lives, but intent on pleasing the visitors it needs to survive. Since many entertainment places do not require visitors to have specialized knowledge or particular backgrounds, audiences can be quickly put at ease, feeling confident and appreciated. Though some patrons still find art museums intimidating (see Chapter 3), this reaction is unlikely at a themed space, which may be awe-inspiring or sublime, but rarely unwelcoming. These places employ visual and conceptual vocabularies derived from mass culture, and provide experiential environments; rather than merely existing within a space, visitors activate it. While many public artworks – especially of the “plop” variety – have difficulty engaging people, a multitude of privately sponsored ventures have built and sustained public support. Two points must be underscored here. First, those destitute of making art for “the people” ought to become better versed in those people’s varied interests. Second, it is wholly appropriate to draw upon popular culture in this endeavor. This does not signify that pressing social concerns are automatically dismissed; in fact, audiences might be more receptive to serious messages delivered through familiar means.

Earthworks (see Chapter 2, Art as Pilgrimage) provide essential cues for comprehending the intersections of private endeavor and public art. First-generation earth artists worked on vast scales, echoing contemporaneous bureaucratic systems and multinational corporations. They operated much like real estate developers, overseeing construction, negotiating with financiers, obtaining land rights, and managing budgets. But they were also community activists, promoting environmental consciousness while enlisting support from local officials and the wider public (Deitch 1983: 86–7). Although their projects brought attention to the earth, they still imposed spectacular built schemes on the “natural” landscape. By either making interventions into or actually rearranging the land, they exercised mastery over it, making it “visually manageable” (Baigell 1989: 3, 5–6, 8). Many of these artists pursued private backing, aware that big ideas cost big money. Yet despite privileging an individual artist’s vision, and utilizing private funding sources, earth and site works often held distinctly public aspirations. They brought awareness to previously under-recognized places, highlighting interplay between the environmental and social realms, and promoted “interfacing the environment” rather than apprehending singular objects (Adcock 1990: 44). These artists also defied the self-mandated system of museums and galleries; like good populists, they sought alternatives when the “accepted way of doing things” no longer served them best. With the constraints of conventional art institutions and practices set aside, they cultivated highly personal reactions to art, underscoring “the coexistence of its space with that of the viewer” (Morris 1992: 253). Earthwork artist Robert Smithson called for more temporal experiences with art, acknowledging the ephemeral nature of existence and thought. He argued for “primary envelopment,” prompting artists to break the “focused limits of rational technique,” shirk studio life’s containment, and become one with materials and spaces. Private entrepreneurs may be able to do so more easily: instead of being discouraged by a priori boundaries, they employ creative technological tactics to accomplish novel feats; the scope of their endeavors frequently requires massive scale; and they produce immersive settings for social engagement and aesthetic contemplation that, perhaps unknowingly, upset “our present art historical limits” (Smithson 1968: 84, 87, 89–91). Of course there are major differences here, most especially earthworks’ emphasis on meditative solitude compared to the carnivalesque atmosphere permeating most themed environments. But both require complex engineering and construction methods, coordinated labor, and cooperative efforts to render the spectacular (Alloway 1976: 51).

Earthworks transform “unmarked land” into “concretized, identifiable, specific locales” merging artwork and setting (Baker 1976: 74–5). A similar effect occurs at themed environments, though most do not begin life as site-specific entities. Although their physical locations may be chosen for topography or climate, themed places often recalibrate or set their own environmental borders, thus reversing the pre-conditions of site-specificity.
Yet a well-themed space becomes site-specific, conveying a sense that no other place in the world is quite like it. While site-specific works counter notions of art as a bauble to be bought and sold, themed places brashly embrace and even foreground their commodity functions. Intentionally or not, these spaces make visible socio-economic and cultural conditions when we consider how they are used, and who feels able or chooses to do so. Rosalyn Deutsche called for public art that acknowledges both the aesthetic and social uses of space rather than privileging one over the other (1992: 160–1). Themed spaces make these functions complementary, while underscoring the fiscal realities of their existence.

Private spaces are often well monitored and maintained by their owners. More carefully protected from harm or neglect than artworks in the public realm, their specialness is preserved by clearly inscribed borders. Opened in 1971 on what was formerly swamp-land, Disney World in Orlando, Florida, became the benchmark of themed entertainment. Its delineated boundaries and physical isolation mark a liminal transition from everyday life into its more rarified and vast terrain (some 28,000 acres), which ensured Walt Disney an unparalleled degree of “quality” control. Not only is Disney World guarded, spotlessly clean, and manned by service-oriented employees (“cast members”), but the scale, scope, and detail of every aspect are choreographed to produce holistic, immersive experiences. Magic Kingdom, the first park built at Disney World and that most directly shaped by Walt’s vision, is mapped as a radial form. Its layout promotes ritualized progression and leisurely pace, with serial transitions between each themed sector. As such it is a highly experiential, fully enveloping space, which requires both our physical movement in and sensual engagement with it. For example, Main Street, USA is the only path into and out of the Magic Kingdom. Disney’s Main Street is frozen in a non-specific and uncritically patriotic past; its “selective amnesia” purges social disharmony and historical blemishes. The quaint, individual storefronts conceal massive, interconnected retail spaces—shopping is the first and last activity of the day. Main Street is laced with wistful memories, most especially those of Walt’s idealized boyhood in small-town America (specifically Marceline, Missouri), the celebratory tone of which is distinctly different from the economic hardships his family actually endured. As Michael Wallace suggests, Disney’s “approach to history was not to reproduce it but to improve it” through a “retrospective tidying up of the past,” which is “freely and disarmingly” admitted (1989: 159, 161–2, 167). Thus Main Street functions as a “marinade of nostalgia and sentiment... meant to ostensibly bespeak a kinder, gentler world” (Fjellman 1992: 394). Walt was jingoistic and unrealistic, but sincere; within his insulated world, he fashioned a view of the US free of cynicism and contradictions (Knight 2000).

James Howard Kunstler dislikes Main Street, USA and its “selective style of nostalgia,” complaining its underlying message is “that a big corporation could make a better Main Street than a bunch of rubes in a real small town.” And yet he admits that Disney’s Main Street is visually interesting and has its own charms: “It is a well-proportioned street full of good relationships between its components, and blessedly free of cars” (1993: 220–1, 225). Blake took a less cynical view of the Magic Kingdom. Though not a “real town” as no one lives there, he argues that its pedestrian-packed, human-scaled streetscape is reminiscent of walking cities like Florence, Italy. For Blake, Disney World is “infinitely more ‘real’” than so-called “ideal city” planning and its dehumanizing effects (1974: 89–90, 94). Disney’s designers, called Imagineers, did not reproduce Marceline or any other town exactly; they sampled from small-town life. Cultural geographer Richard Francaviglia posits that while academics remain rueful of Disney’s neatly edited “reality,” Walt’s vision has “nearly universal appeal.” He concludes: “That Disney was ‘one of us’ is underscored by the mass appeal of his Main Street. We feel comfortable there as we fill the role of consumers of both products and place” (1996: 157, 162).

Disney’s critics worry that theme parks will become “indistinguishable from the real world” (Zukin 1995: 58). While Eco asserts that Disney’s “magic enclosure” clearly inscribes its function as fantasy, he laments that in perfecting “the fake” Disney “not only produces illusion, but—in confessing it—stimulates the desire for it.” Yet Disney’s imitations are not as “perfect” as Eco suggests; they are easily identified as simulacra. To partake in their pleasures does not make “reality” inferior, or relegate us to “total passivity” (1975: 43–4, 46, 48). Though Sorkin may have contextualized it as
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Not Quite "Art," Not Quite "Public"

a “utopia of transience” and an “aura-stripped hypercity” (1992: 206–7, 231–2), Disney World is a very real place, not a mutant city-want-to-be, but a theme park profiting its carefully branded, immersive fantasy to a knowing clientele. Disney’s historical and fantastic scenarios may be simulated, but the experiences it provides through these are quite real and for some, perhaps, enlightening. Contrary to George Ritzer’s assertion that people are unaware of and unable to rebel against the controls exercised over them at Disney World (1998: 144–5), I argue that an increased level of honesty exists there. Since commercialism and fantasy are so inextricably and clearly linked with no serious attempt to hide either, most visitors can readily discern, and accept or reject, the consumptive overtures and Disney’s particular brand of fun. Though Lyn Lofland contends that “counterlocales” such as Disney World foster revulsion for “rough-and-tumble reality” (1998: 216–17, 221), she frets needlessly. Disney’s patrons are more than capable of both appreciating and scrutinizing its themed environments. To assume otherwise disrespects Disney’s public, and discounts the running critiques to be heard between visitors to the parks on any given day.

Spectacle must be kept in check. As Edward Soja observed, “advanced capitalism” produces and reduces space, “fragmented into parcels, homogenized into discrete commodities” (1989: 92). If the “special” is to remain so, we must fortify some borders. Our society is overrun by the pseudo-spectacular, most visible in the propagation of themed restaurants and shops. Fighting for the attentions of similar demographics, these places distinguish themselves by showcasing their supposedly unique qualities. For example Rain Forest Café, which is found at Disney World and numerous American malls, serves meals in a mock jungle setting as pretend thunderstorms roll in each half hour. The Johnny Rockets franchise, which has also proliferated at US malls, proffers 1950s-style “diners”; music plays on tabletop jukeboxes while waiters draw ketchup smiley faces to accompany your burger and fries. These themes can be fun but are limited; transparent rather than transformative. Hannigan is correct when he claims we too easily assimilate such experiences into our lives. Any era, style, or culture can be “appropriated, disemboweled and then marketed as a safe, sanitized version of the original,” which may benefit investors and corporations more than consumers, and generate an unquenchable thirst for ever-novel spectacle (1998: 69–71, 192, 195–200). What makes a place like Disney World special is that nowhere else is precisely like it. If theming propagates at its current rate, the magic of Disney’s kingdom could be lost forever. Writing in 1997 Ada Louise Huxtable retained her “right to remain unenchanted” by Disney’s “mediocre, shamelessly consumerized” parks (1997: 49, 116, 253). I suggest that each of us reserve our rights to be enchanted, critical, or both.

Open Pocketbook, Open Agenda?

The relationship between art and money has always been present and frequently uncomfortable, a requisite but somewhat unpleasant reality. Yet economics is one of the meaningful tools through which we can understand art in general, and public art more specifically. If places are free to enter, but their users do not understand, appreciate, or feel welcome in them, are they truly public? Might private ventures, freed from the constraints of an imposed egalitarianism, sometimes be more civic-spirited than their typical public art counterparts? Museums and government agencies striving for neutrality, trying not to offend anyone, can promote bland art in the name of political correctness. No such neutrality exists; there is always someone behind the scenes making choices that usually favor her own tastes. Private sector visionaries can openly indulge highly singular points of view. Since there is no pretense toward consensus and an economics-based hierarchy presides, decisions can be made quickly and unilaterally. While a publicly funded artwork may have literally millions of taxpaying owners who have no direct control over it, privately sponsored ventures have far fewer owners with much greater power. Also, public artists regularly face budgetary and community restrictions, hurdles which might be more easily cleared by affluent, well-connected businesspeople. Private patrons hold the purse strings, select those who will carry out their plans, determine sites and materials, have final say over aesthetic matters, and can prioritize their own preferences over the expectations of others. Some persistent stereotypes must be undermined here: artists,
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by a local bank for an additional year after Culture in Action ended (Arning, Chin, Jacob, and Kwon 2006). To help audiences navigate the shifting terrain of such new genre public art, Sculpture Chicago organized an ongoing series of events beginning about five months before and extending about three months after Culture in Action respectively opened and closed. It also offered weekly bus tours and self-guided maps for visitors.

Artist Doug Ashford, best known as a member of the now defunct collective Group Material, is encouraged by tactics such as those evidenced in Culture in Action. His enthusiasm is not because collaboration is predictable or “easier, but because there are opportunities to learn,” and “people discover a creative context in daily life.” Yet Ashford reminds us to be wary of the “dark side” of such community-based projects, which can be reorganized “into a kind of measurable service economy that’s based in social effect and urban development” (Ashford, Ewald, Felshin, and Phillips 2006: 63, 70, 72). Eleanor Heartney also welcomes democratically minded opportunities to close gaps between art and non-art publics, commending Culture in Action as an experimental lab.” Yet she is wise to ask if any contradictions exist between the social purpose of such participatory art and its institutionalization. She worries that in romanticizing notions of “community,” artists neglect “the real tensions and conflicts that underlie any group interaction.” Heartney fears an extreme dematerialization of art might occur through such practices, eradicating the distinctions between public art and social activism. She queries, “If we reduce public art to the role of promoting community self-esteem, have we come to that far from the false consensus implied by the traditional war memorial or the public statue?” (1993: 46, 48–9). Likewise, concerns were raised about whether some of the Culture in Action artists had any sustaining “lived knowledge” of the communities with which they worked, and that the longest-lasting effects from the collaborations were felt by the art world, not the participating communities (Hixson 1998: 49). While the eight projects lacked coherent interrelationships, and their efficacy as collaborative endeavors was difficult to assess, Culture in Action still provided an important model for community participation in the arts. It underscored the importance of different ethnicities, races, and cultures having a say in their own representations, without pigeonholing them through limited definitions. Artists spent at least a year collaborating with various constituencies to address their social concerns. As Gee suggests; “Getting input from people rather than simply approval or support raises the stakes . . . because it raises expectations that input will be considered, but more than that, acted on” (1995: 64). It is not incumbent upon public artists to become politicians, glad-handing and ever-bending to community whims. But those who engage in sincere interactions with their publics are more likely to gain useful information, wider endorsement, and perhaps some dedicated new collaborators. With the loosening of an artist’s controlling grip comes viewers’ increased agency in determining the quality and substance of their own art experiences.

Claiming Space and Place

With the rise of activist art groups such as the Art Workers Coalition in New York City, and a newfound appreciation for “community art,” inclusive, experiential models for artmaking evolved. This climate prompted the public to actually become artists, or at least work with them directly (Raven 1989: 4, 18), blurring the lines between artists and audiences. The efforts of so-called “outsider artists” are instructive here. These artists are self-taught, and, unless co-opted by the museum and gallery system (as has been the case with Howard Finster), function outside of the art world’s conventions and constrictions. “Outsiders” make art for highly personal reasons that often have little to do with fame or money; it was only after Henry Darger’s death that his work was discovered and became publicly known. Though sometimes their visions might seem out of step with society at large, these “outsiders” can serve as prime examples of individual agency in the arts, translating personal experiences into publicly resonant ones.

Though a professionally trained artist, Charles Simonds’ work is indebted to this outsider spirit. His miniature Dwellings, hundreds of which sprouted up like clusters of mushrooms in New York during the early 1970s, offered an antidote to “megalomaniac and
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materialistic civilisation” (Dimitrijevic 1987: 46). Although the first of these were built in his studio, the Dwellings quickly migrated outdoors to SoHo’s streets. After 1972 Simonds moved the project to the Lower East Side, bringing art to audiences the art world had largely disregarded (Lippard 1977b: 44). Inspired by Pueblo Indian buildings he had seen as a child, the artist would laboriously erect elaborate structures, spending no more than a single day at a particular site. City streets, cracked walls, building ledges, gutters, and vacant lots playing host to his Dwellings, which were sometimes left in deliberately unfinished or ruinous states. The Dwellings were intended to shelter Simonds’ “Little People, an imaginary community about which the artist had written extensively. The Little People became a poignant metaphor for area residents, struggling for survival under perilous circumstances. Simonds encouraged his audiences to have firsthand encounters with the work, welcoming curious passersby to chat about the Dwellings or even help build them. The diminutive structures, constructed of tiny untired clay bricks, were decidedly vulnerable, both to the elements and anyone who wished to destroy them. As such they became symbolic of the urban fabric; its “inconvenient” or “invisible” citizens (the poor or homeless), the fragile ebb and flow of neighborhoods, and the ephemeral nature of life itself. The Dwellings also suggested hope; although some were quickly demolished, new ones would pop up, while still others persisted under the protective gaze of a community. Since the Dwellings could not be moved without being destroyed, they reclaimed social space without being co-opted for personal ownership. Thus they became communal property, entry points for discussion about larger social issues, and sometimes sources of pride (one work even lasted for a period of five years; Smagula 1983: 294–9, 304). Bringing the Dwellings indoors, as happened at the Whitney Museum of American Art, alters their allegorical and physical context significantly. Here Dwelling (Part III) was tucked into a covered niche in the stairwell, no longer exposed to the ravages of weather or available for participatory exchanges with viewers as were its companion pieces across the street. While the indoor work may be preserved, our agency has been constrained to more passive looking. On the street, one could ignore, damage, admire, or safeguard the Dwellings; they may have been less precious there, but they were certainly more potent.

Increasing Individual Agency on the Public Art Front

By the early 1970s the United States witnessed the rise of two related but distinct movements: muralism, as officially endorsed by local communities, governmental agencies or private patrons; and graffiti. Murals (large-scale paintings, most frequently found on walls) that recorded local events and people, and reflected cultural tastes and collective values, became commonplace in public art at that time. Drawing from the protest narratives of earlier Mexican muralism, the history of Depression-era work relief programs, and 1960s activism, these murals were deliberately anti-elitist. As such they were often overlooked or dismissed by critics, with their inconsistent styles and blatant socio-political agendas constituting “a challenge to establishment ideas on what is permissible as art” (Miles 1989: 31). Painted collaboratively by community members, or by individuals functioning as neighborhood representatives, murals could counter the dispiriting effects of downtrodden areas. Many of the muralists had no formal training, and those who did eschewed solitary studio life to enact social change “in the only forum that then seemed viable: the streets” (Cockcroft, Weber and Cockcroft 1977: xix–xx). Although muralism was not confined to the west coast it did flourish there, especially among racial and ethnic communities that had been largely excluded from the art world. The Great Wall of Los Angeles (1976–84), for example, was painted under the auspices of the Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC). The scope of the project was admirably ambitious: artist Judith Baca directed the efforts of 30 professional artists, and as many as 450 teen workers (some recruited through the juvenile justice system). Together they produced a 13-foot-high, 2,435-foot-long mural spanning the Tujunga Wash flood control channel in the San Fernando Valley. The work depicts the history of California, from dinosaurs to the 1984 Olympics, “from the viewpoint of those usually written out of the histories.” The project was distinctly populist. To learn more about California’s multicultural character, Baca brought in ethnic historians to address misconceptions as the mural was still being painted. The Great Wall was intended to foster individual and collective identity, and integrate art “into the social as well as the physical space of a community” (Lippard 1990: 170–1). The teen workers had input regarding the mural’s narrative structure and design, and were paid for their work as a demonstration of their worth to the community. Baca even
organized public forums, arranged for job and drug counseling for her workers, and invited guest lecturers to teach weekly classes on subjects such as social history and economics (Doss 1992: 69, 71–4).

Like muralism, the graffiti movement explored the “communal ownership” of public spaces that had been increasingly privatized (Gude 1989: 321–2). Also like the muralists, most graffiti writers (as they called themselves) lacked any formal art training. But writers’ work was differentiated from that of the muralists by its often illicit nature. Many graffiti artists painted illegally upon subway cars and stations, or the walls of privately owned places. Though many observers regarded graffiti as intrusive defacement, others saw it as an energizing enhancement of the urban milieu. Furthermore, while the muralists sought broader, more diversified audiences, first-generation writers were an insiders’ group; their work may have been seen by a larger public, but its comprehension was reserved for fellow members of the graffiti community. The genesis of New York’s graffiti movement can be traced to a specific person and year: Taki 183 (a moniker combining his nickname and address on 183rd Street), a teen who began tagging in 1970. Early on graffiti developed a hierarchy of style and content. Hastily drawn “throw-ups” were placed anywhere, focusing on quantity and visibility. Other “taggers” took pride in more skillful, stylized paintings of their nicknames. Taggers sought to become “kings,” expanding their territory by “getting up” throughout the city, and “bombing” subway trains that would travel to other boroughs with their paintings. “Piecers” (from “masterpiece”) emphasized quality and distinctive style through carefully painted, usually large-scale images. Both taggers and piecers employed dynamic graphics, clean lines, layering, “and a feeling of spontaneity” (Geer and Rowe 1995). Though writers often worked in crews (groups), there was a perceptible competitive spirit. Graffitiists developed their own system of apprenticeship, in which younger, aspiring writers were mentored under their slightly older counterparts. Despite charges that graffiti was an unorganized movement, writers adopted critical practices and peer review that suggest otherwise; they met at “writers’ corners” to discuss issues pertinent to their art, and acted as their own curators, photographing and cataloguing their work, while studying art by other writers (Powers 1996).

According to Suwan Geer, graffiti is both a socio-political dialogue and confrontational gesture that “exemplifies and illustrates who’s in charge.” Rebellions against the capitalist system by adopting its codes, writers took possession of space by marking it (Geer and Rowe 1995). As Hal Foster queried, “In the midst of a city of signs that exclude you, what to do but inscribe signs of your own?” (1985: 48–9). Yet the public at large had difficulty seeing graffiti artists as anything more than criminals. And critics could not translate their art historical language to accommodate graffiti, even when an eager art market enticed the writers to show in its galleries and museums. Bigotry, too, played a role in the critical neglect of graffiti; the majority of first-generation writers were teens from minority ethnic groups and poor neighborhoods. Today writers often collaborate to protect and preserve their culture. God Bless Graffiti Coalition, Inc., a Chicago-based collective, was founded in 2000 to counter “anti-graffiti trends.” The group insists that graffiti is like advertising; a means of delivering messages in public space, though the purpose is personal expression rather than consumption (Thompson and Sholette 2004: 71–2).

In the 1960s and 70s the Situationist International, a politically spirited artists’ group, postured themselves as cultural rebels challenging the assumptions of everyday life and its institutions. According to Hartney, they “preached the transformation of the city through a revolutionary merger of art practice and social behavior” (1993: 48). Instead of conceiving art as a “specialized procedure,” the Situationists called upon members of the public to evaluate mass culture (Wodiczko 1987: 44; Thompson and Sholette 2004: 16). The loudest voice among them was that of Guy Debord, whose Marxist leanings produced an “unsparing critique” of late capitalism and what he viewed as its dehumanizing technology and placating consumerist spectacles. Debord believed the public was being purposefully distracted from “real” political situations by passive sensory pleasures that discouraged intellectualism and activism (Ross 1989: 111, 209; McKee 2005: 107–8). The Situationists employed two interventionist techniques to remedy this situation: détouré, the rearrangement of popular culture’s signs to create new meanings; and dérive, short meandering walks to reveal the “psycho-geography” of a city while resisting the controls of its...
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planning (Thompson and Sholette 2004: 16). In a similar vein, a number of subsequent artists’ collectives conceive art as cultural critique. By the mid 1980s the Guerrilla Girls were directly confronting women’s “systematic exclusion … from the hallowed halls of the institutionalized art world” (Dubin 1992: 63). In 1985 the Guerrilla Girls began their assault, launching a poster campaign of “public service messages” that exposed latent sexism and power structures in the art world. Taking to the streets of New York’s then-trendy art districts at night, the Guerrilla Girls used subversive tactics to disclose the inequities of life for female artists that existed under a veneer of patronizing niceties. One of the most famous posters, THE ADVANTAGES OF BEING A WOMAN ARTIST, enumerates benefits such as “Not being stuck in a tenured teaching position,” and “Being included in revised versions of art history.” By providing carefully researched data delivered with tongue-in-cheek humor, and naming specific culprits, the Guerrilla Girls sought to shame fellow artists, gallery dealers, and art institutions into better behavior.

As the self-proclaimed “conscience of the art world,” the Guerrilla Girls increased their scope to confront racism in the art world, and then other socio-cultural issues in the larger world such as homelessness, AIDS, and rape. The members of the group remain anonymous, adopting pseudonyms (names of female artists such as Frida Kahlo and Georgia O’Keeffe) and appearing in public wearing gorilla masks. Whitney Chadwick suggests this anonymity and the group’s collective identity counter the “art world’s obsession with individual personalities,” while also protecting the Girls’ careers from venal curators and dealers. The Guerrilla Girls handily overturn “the art world’s cool insistence that great art, like cream, inevitably rises to the top” (1995: 8–9, 11). By naming names and citing statistics, the Girls seek not only to reveal inequities, but to correct them. Their tactics “disrupt the surface calm with which the art world generally operates,” exposing its “pressure points” and forcing its insiders to “scrutinize themselves for evidence and complicity in perpetuating social ills” (Dubin 1992: 136–7). In many ways, the Guerrilla Girls are the consummate public artists: they work in the public realm; adopt media from the common culture such as posters and stickers; address issues of wider social relevance; demand fairness from institutions disseminating public culture; and invite viewers to be co-conspirators, for example, by signing their names as Guerrilla Girls in gallery guest books, so the watch over the art world becomes a collaborative endeavor.

The Boston-area-based Institute for Infinitely Small Things (IFIST) is an offshoot of iKatun, a nonprofit organization whose mission is to “present and support contemporary art that fosters public engagement in the politics of everyday information” (IFIST 2006). The Institute is a purposefully democratic artists’ collective; any interested person can join, and a grassroots sensibility reigns. Comprised of a fluctuating, diversified membership (artists, activists, curators, historians, filmmakers, anthropologists, accountants, and computer programmers have been among its ranks), IFIST seeks to make small “disturbances that have a ripple effect.” Drawing inspiration from art movements that have coalesced performance and politics including the Situationist International, IFIST positions itself as a “performance research organization”, donning lab coats (symbols of the “absurdity of their authority”), conducting experiments, and documenting the results. The Institute does not presume to activate public space, which is already always activated, but provides heightened awareness of it through their activities. One of its earliest (and ongoing) projects, Corporate Commands, initially began as a database to collect corporate advertising slogans stated “in the imperative.” This evolved into a series of performances, influenced by instruction-based Fluxus art. Instead of IFIST scripting the directives, these are taken ready-made from the corporate world. The commands, which sell lifestyles rather than particular products, are executed as literally as possible, and performed in close proximity to the signs on which they appear. Since these advertising messages are ultimately oblique, however, there can be no single “correct” interpretation. For example, the group performed “Enjoy Life” (Sovereign Bank’s slogan) at Boston’s busy Copley Place Mall, picnicking, dancing, and frolicking. By doing so they tested the boundaries of privately owned public space; although there was nothing inherently threatening in IFIST’s gestures, mall security removed them so that other patrons would not be disturbed. Thus corporate marketing is interrogated and reconstituted as art practice. By taking the commands to the street, the public is
directly (and sometimes unwelcomingly) confronted, though the
group does not badger those clearly not wishing to engage. IFIST
maintains that it does not make the “black-and-white” judgments
of traditional activism, but offers “playful” interventions to scrutinize
socio-political constructs (IFIST 2006; Sabal 2006).

In its mapping project, The City Formerly Known as Cambridge
(begun 2006; originally titled The Initiative for the Renaming of
Names in Cambridge), the Institute provides a framework allowing
audiences to determine their own levels of participation. After being
asked by the Cambridge Arts Council to create a work in conjunc-
tion with the town’s River Festival, the group decided to probe the
philosophical, psychological, and physical dimensions of place.
Members of the public were invited to rename the streets and
neighborhoods of Cambridge, Massachusetts (a self-consciously
academic town), or leave things as they are. The project acknowl-
edges the financial infrastructures of art and society; although the
first renaming of a place is free—a conquest of territory if you will—
subsequent renamings require payment (which usually starts at
25 cents and must increase by at least a penny each time). The most
frequently renamed locales reveal what seem to be the most prized
and contested places within Cambridge, and underscore the con-
sequences of naming that might normally escape attention. IFIST’s
renaming opportunities are hosted at community events such as a
neighborhood block party or farmer’s market, where the group sets
up its “portable naming studio.” To avoid being coercive the Insti-
tute does not solicit public involvement, but shares information on
the project with interested parties who can self-select to participate.

Dolores Hayden’s reflections on her experiences with The Power of
Place, a nonprofit she had founded in Los Angeles, are applicable
here: “Through mapping ... it is possible to find out what residents
of a city think about the meaning of urban history in their lives and
in the places they go. People in a neighborhood have unique under-
standings of its landmarks ... and social organization” (1995: 229).

The City Formerly Known as Cambridge is an invitation, not a
mandate. It does not demand that people do anything, but presents
them with opportunities to make changes as and if they see fit. There
is an implicit trust in the public’s abilities to engage, judge, and
inform. Local citizens furnish illuminating details on Cambridge’s

evolution that would otherwise likely be forgotten. In fact, the
conventional paradigm of art expertise is turned inside out: it is the
audience members here who are the authorities, the Institute is just
a mediator; only with the public’s valuable, insider knowledge can
the project be completed. All of the renamings are compiled on the
Institute’s website, which catalogues when they occurred, and pro-
vides quotations from those who initiated the renamings to explain
why they have done so. These range from declarative statements
that snatch space (“My nickname and I am awesome!”), to socio-
political agendas laying claim to unknown histories (Harvard Street
was renamed for Ann Radcliffe to recognize her support of Harvard
University, which exceeded that of John Harvard himself). Once
the project is finished, the Institute will publish a revised map of
Cambridge (IFIST 2006; Sabal 2006). Of course, names in the
town are not going to actually change as a result of this work,
though that is not the point. The Institute prompts criticality of
familiar spaces to reveal their history’s dynamic fluidity, thereby
empowering people to make symbolic relocations of place on
highly personal terms.

Dig In

Over the flux of time, our cities morph, sometimes almost imper-
ceptibly and at others quite drastically; no place is timeless. Cities
are always changing as structures are razed or built, people migrate
between communities, and personal biographies disintegrate and
accumulate. As Nick Kaye contends, the assumed stability of site is
a falsely constructed notion; sites are ambiguous, unpredictable,
transitory, and conflicting spaces, which would remain inert with-
out their users who continually perform in and thus activate them
(2000: 3, 5–6). Both Henri Lefebvre and Lewis Mumford empha-
sized the social dimensions of the city. For Lefebvre the city was
perpetually “ephemeral,” and the experience of time and space
there determined by “the rhythms of the people” who occupy it.
He concluded that “the art of living in the city” was, itself, a work
of art (1996: 173, 237). Likewise, Mumford touted the “active
ability of humans to disassemble and then reshape her on a grand scale. As such, the Dig has its historical precedent in eighteenth-century conceptions of the romantic sublime. Robert Smithson observed that the earth is shaped by continual processes of “disruption,” and marveled at the “unitary chaos” of industrial-scale construction. He praised such construction’s ability to produce accidentally picturesque “ruins in reverse,” which unlike the “romantic ruin” do not fall after they are erected, but “rise into ruin before they are built” (1967: 53–4; 1973: 118). For Smithson the “organized wreckage” of “heavy construction” yielded a “devastating kind of primordial grandeur,” of which the process is often more compelling than the finished project (1968: 83, 87). I agree. Once the Dig is completed, and its invigorating plasticity settles into the hardened arteries required of a serviceable infrastructure, it will stop being public art. The Big Dig did not start its life as “art,” but one might suspect that many of the best works – the most provocative, transgressive, unsettling ones – could have begun as unwitting artistic gestures as well. Originally scheduled for completion in 1998, project officials now hope to conclude the Dig in 2007. As a commuter I am ready for the Dig to end, but as a flâneur about the city, I will be sad to see it go. No city is ever really “finished,” which is hopefully true of any artwork that lives in the public sphere.

Reflecting on his shift from private studio life to working in the public realm, sculptor George Segal noted:

Now I have to take people’s feelings into account ... I don’t have to apologize for having my own opinions, but I do have to start thinking on levels other than my own ... The question is whether you can maintain the density of your subject matter, a decently high level of thinking, and still be accessible to a lot of people. (Segal qtd. in Beardsley 1981b: 44)

These observations are more than revealing about the personal and collective, elite and popular tensions inherent in “public art.” By no means has this book attempted an encyclopedic treatment of public art. Neither is it a guide for professionals (Barbara Goldstein’s Public Art by the Book, 2005, is an excellent example of such), nor a treatise lamenting mass culture. Rather it offers a populist lens through which to consider public art, based on an understanding of populism as increasing viewers’ agency through proactive choices. Instead of building a new hierarchy, an extension of public art’s current dimensions is proffered, in which the frictions between public and private, and high and low, remain happily unresolved. Rather than measuring “successes” and “failures” in public art, the book has foregrounded issues of audience response, engagement, and interaction, and called for a wider constitution of “accessibility.”
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Conclusion

Admittedly, these premises require some readjustments of the definition of “public art,” particularly in terms of roles to be played by the private sector. But such privatization can threaten the well-being of public culture, as seen in the contradictory promises of “redevelopment” examined in this chapter. To counter this concern, we will next turn to nonprofit organizations, examining their ability to foster healthy public–private partnerships. The discussion of nonprofits also considers the benefits of temporary public artworks, which are commonly commissioned by such organizations. The chapter then takes up two important models for populist public art: the University of California at San Diego’s Stuart Collection, for works that are sited on school campuses, and the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt, as an example of grassroots collectivism and social activism. We conclude with a case study comparing two sites in Chicago, the Harold Washington Library Center and Millennium Park, to consider why the former has difficulty securing an engaged audience, while the latter may indeed forecast the direction of public art in the twenty-first century.

The Trouble with (Re)Development

Cities can be intoxicating places, but they can be overwhelming and inhospitable too. Despite Le Corbusier’s utopian vision of “a spectacle of order and vitality” (1929: 322), if his 1922 plan for “A Contemporary City for Three Million People” had been built, the streets of Paris would have succumbed to an unrelenting symmetry more imposing than Baron Haussmann’s sweeping boulevards of the nineteenth century. Not surprisingly, public art has often been a corrective, particularly in the city, where it functions as an aesthetic band-aid suturing ruptures in the social fabric. Enhancing the visual appeal of public places can go a long way in terms of bolstering community satisfaction and interest but as Malcolm Miles noted, public art has been increasingly co-opted to serve private interests, especially real estate development, without sustained critical examination of those projects’ effects. He concludes public art’s contributions to urban gentrification may indeed be “speculative,” especially when the values of art are conceived as “independent of the problems of city life” (1997: 1, 12). By the late 1980s, Patricia Phillips complained public space was only that which had been “left over” by private developers after the real estate boom, lamenting that “the clear delineation of a public space has been packaged as a neighborly gesture, with public art the fence that identifies boundaries” (1988: 93).

In Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics, Rosalyn Deutsche utilized “spatial-cultural” discourse to examine the contested terrain of public space, and its growing privatization. She lodged a battery of charges against so-called “redevelopment” schemes (and their manipulations of public art), which supposedly reinvigorate ailing urbanism, but seem to serve mostly well-heeled citizens, tourists, and the developers. Deutsche decries—mostly male—academics who fortify leftist spatial theories at the expense of other philosophies and movements, particularly feminism. In their agendas she identifies a tendency to simplify social spaces as unitary entities, rather than acknowledge their fragmentary nature and shifting socio-political dynamics. Though redevelopment projects are often promoted as socially responsible and collectively produced, Deutsche notes that many of these reinforce socio-economic inequities, and contribute to social problems such as homelessness. By focusing on matters of beauty and utility, Deutsche argues, developers neutralize highly charged issues of class and race that shape public space. She concludes that redevelopment projects and public art are called upon to “reify as natural the conditions of the late capitalist city,” and thus community, “both as territory and social form,” is undermined by profit-motivated developers and short-sighted politicians. Deutsche’s warnings can feel a bit one-sided, especially when considering some of the benefits the private sector might bring to public art (see Chapter 4). Yet even well-intentioned builders, ignorant of the economic and cultural history of a place earmarked for redevelopment, can actually further entrench social strata. Deutsche correctly asserts that those who myopically focus upon aesthetics and technical issues of production lose sight of the socio-political forces determining the evolution and shifting uses of a place. Developers who provide basic amenities and claim to beautify places on everyone’s behalf try to cast their efforts in a moralistic light, which
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smoothes over cultural differences, and the realities of disenfranchisement and displacement that can accompany gentrification. Simply making beautiful spaces is not enough; developers must thoughtfully consider their social functions (1992: 158–61, 164–8; 1996). Otherwise, as John Hannigan fears, private spaces will continue to replace public ones, creating a solipsistic “city of illusion,” physically, economically, and culturally isolated from, and impervious to, its neighbors and their concerns (1998: 2–11). Michael Sorkin condemns “urban renewal with a sinister twist”; a proliferation of insulated borders, increased surveillance and segregation, and pastiche in place of historical styles (1992: xiv–xv). Of course, such trends are not confined to the city; our suburban sprawl generates many opportunistic development schemes – witness the growth of “privatopias,” cul-de-sacs bursting at the seams with McMansions (Hayden 2006). What are the historical and cultural costs of a “gentrification” mindset, which disposes with the past when it becomes inconvenient or unprofitable? Dolores Hayden laments that many designers possess only fragmentary knowledge of our built environment’s history, and thus the dazzling schemes they conceive to rehabilitate places can end up in effect killing them (Hayden 1992: 262–3).

Many gentrified spaces send mixed signals; they seem public, but in actuality are private endeavors whose communal spaces are included to meet zoning requirements and present their developers as civic-spirited. For Deutsche, Battery Park City (BPC) is a troubling example of such gentrification. BPC is a multi-billion-dollar redevelopment project, sited on 92 acres of landfill along the waterfront of New York’s Lower West Side. Under the behest of the New York State legislature, the BPC Authority (a “public benefit” corporation) was created in 1968. The Authority develops BPC’s public spaces, and coordinates the efforts of private developers who lease the land, making sure they adhere to design guidelines emphasizing environmental consciousness. Though low- and moderate-income housing were part of its initial conception, by the time BPC was built in the 1980s these objectives were pushed aside (Wiley 1991: 270, 273). Contrary to the fact that many of its artworks are “totally accessible to the public” (Marter 1989: 318), Deutsche finds BPC ultimately exclusionary; mostly high-end housing and commercial businesses, buffered by politically correct public spaces. Martha Rosler concurs, characterizing BPC as an “urban fortress” where public spaces screen “enclaves of wealth” (1991: 17, 32). M. Christine Boyer is also critical of BPC, complaining that its “recycled architectural elements and styles borrowed from the city’s best residential sections” were used to justify “the expenditure of public money in an essentially private domain” (1992: 194–5). Undoubtedly, BPC’s developers wished to turn a profit, but one could also argue that they tried to create vibrant public spaces. Since its reconception in 1979, the BPC proposal included art. Much of what followed at BPC either blends in with the environment, or dutifully regurgitates public art’s now-popular conventions (for example, Stuart Crawford’s Police Memorial on BPC’s Esplanade is quite derivative of Lin’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial; see Chapter 2). Yet people do feel comfortable interacting with the art here, and some of it ventures social commentary. Tom Otterness’ The Real World (1992) is a sculptural playground where a Lilliputian civilization of bronze figures (seemingly lifted from Bosch’s Garden of Earthly Delights) cavorts, chasing after a trail of coins while a “fat cat” presides over the scene. The work reads as a cautionary “allegory of greed,” with the financial district looming nearby (Brenson 1996: 33; Senic 2003: 195–6). Overall BPC is a pleasant place, but it feels like a quality-controlled, sanitized model of New York, rather than part of the city. It is decidedly upscale, offering spectacular views of the river from its magnificent public spaces, though these seem to be used mostly by neighborhood residents. The subtext here is that beauty, quiet, cleanliness, and safety come at the exclusion of lower- and middle-income housing. Our behaviors here are also closely managed, as most clearly evidenced by the proliferation of signage throughout BPC. We are reminded not to feed squirrels and pigeons; skateboarders and bikers are told to “respect others, go slow”; and dogs are encouraged not to bark, with help from their owners who can translate the “shhh” sign at the dog run. All visitors to BPC are implored to “Please be courteous. Let’s work together for a better community.” Some artists use biting irony to challenge developers’ assertions that gentrification is good for all of us. Rachel Whiterad’s House (1993–4, sponsored by Arntgel) was a concrete cast of a Victorian row home, slated for demolition in a governmental “improvement”
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plan for a working-class neighborhood in London’s East End. The cast was so arresting that it demanded immediate attention, and lingered in the mind as a ghostly vestige long after the sculpture was destroyed just three months after its creation, against the artist’s wishes (Freedman 2004: 238). Krzysztof Wodiczko’s works, which effectively “augment individual autonomy and make visible certain forms of social oppression,” are equally evocative (Thompson and Sholette 2004: 19). Wodiczko sees his work as “critical public art,” making “aesthetic-critical interruptions, infiltrations and appropriations that question the symbolic, psychopolitical and economic operations of the city” (1987: 42). The artist is best known for his slide projection pieces, such as those done in New York’s Union Square Park during its gentrification in the 1980s. Onto the park’s freshly restored nineteenth-century monuments, Wodiczko projected images of homeless people, one of the populations forced out of the area by such redevelopment and historic preservation efforts. Thus he made the monuments witnesses “to the sociospatial conflicts that were being employed to conceal” (Deutsche 1996: xv), and the projections “counter-monuments” that both “revive” and “disturb” their original sources (Kaye 2000: 53–5, 38). Wodiczko’s Homeless Vehicle Project (1988) was a response to Mayor Ed Koch’s 1987 mandate that all homeless persons in New York undergo psychiatric evaluations, which could force them to be hospitalized. Designed in consultation with his “co-artists” (Thompson and Sholette 2004: 19, 27–8), in this case members of the city’s homeless population, the Homeless Vehicle Project provided mobile shelter, a can and bottle collection facility, and storage. Intended not as a substitute for “permanent, safe, and dignified shelter” but as advocacy for such, the project addressed immediate survival needs while exposing the deeply troubling socio-economic realities that compelled “fellow urban citizens” to live on the streets. Thus Wodiczko would not allow us to ignore the homeless “as identity-free objects that must be negotiated rather than recognized,” nor regentrification’s part in the creation of that population and its plight (Lurie and Wodiczko 1988: 54–5, 58). The attendant costs and dangers of redevelopment are causes for genuine concern, but I would argue are best served by such powerful ruminations on life in the wake of regentrification’s path, instead of alarmist anti-capitalist rhetoric.

Art for All?

Nonprofits and the Ephemeral Idyll

Historically nonprofit organizations have been effective means through which to harness private energies for public good. Often they are held up as the primary, if not the sole, example of private interests at work in public art, usually to the exclusion of for-profit businesses. My purpose in addressing nonprofits in this last chapter is to underscore their vital role, while affording the commercial entities examined in Chapter 4 the attention that has normally eluded them in the public art canon. According to Jill Medvedow, director of Boston’s Institute of Contemporary Art (see Chapter 8), the efficacy of nonprofit organizations resides in their ability to intersect with “other cultural disciplines and diverse communities” to be truly “democratic in their access and availability” (2004: 10). Nonprofits can enter into partnerships with others that extend their reach, coffers, and spheres of influence. In such mutually beneficial relationships, for example, a nonprofit gains legitimacy and clout by aligning forces with a government agency, while an over-stretched municipality is revitalized by an influx of energy from a public-minded private sector. In an age when vision is unlimited but funds are tight, such public-private partnerships may be among the most feasible ways to commission, maintain, and restore works of public art. These partnerships often emphasize advocacy and community involvement, especially at the essential planning phases of a project.

From 1978 to 1985 the Cambridge Arts Council (CAC), a for-profit nonprofit, teamed up with the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) to develop the “Arts on the Line” program for the Boston subway system’s Red Line, then adding new stations. The CAC administered the program, whose funds were provided by the US Department of Transportation through the MBTA. Arts on the Line endeavored to be democratic and open itself to public scrutiny, while still commissioning high-quality, permanent, site-specific works. As such, it became a model for other cities. Art professionals (including those from the respective neighborhoods) selected the artworks, but input was invited from local community members (some of whom served on advisory committees), not only to gain their support, but to better understand the character.