RICHARD LACHAPELLE

9. AESTHETICS ON THE RUN: THE PUBLIC SPHERE, PUBLIC ART, AND ART EDUCATION

INTRODUCTION

Rightly or wrongly, it has often been argued that public art serves an educational function. As an extreme example of this belief, artists often assume that simply by placing their work in a public space, they will somehow miraculously win over new audiences. Such a scenario assumes that the art object itself is somehow capable of taking on an educational role. In a commissioned report for the Arts Council of England, Selwood (1995) reports that she has found no evidence to support the "received wisdom of professionals" that, over time and with repeated exposure, the public comes to appreciate works of public art and that this, in turn, leads to the development of new audiences (p. 249).

Selwood also decries the rhetoric that the many constituencies involved in the production and promotion of public art use to justify their activities. She concludes, "few other fields of endeavour are defended by such rhetoric" (1995, p. 57). Examples of common justifications include the arguments that public art should "raise levels of awareness", "challenge people's preconceptions", and convince people that art is "not a luxury, but a basic need" (pp. 56–57).

From such rhetoric, it is clear that until very recently few art professionals had acquired a full awareness of the specificities of public art, especially when public art is compared to other forms of contemporary art practices. In other words, the art world needs to ask: What makes art *public*? An obvious answer, but perhaps not the only one, has to do with the context and the locations in which public art is placed, the so-called public arena.

THE PUBLIC SPHERE AS A POLITICAL THEATER

Arthur C. Danto (1987) once remarked that public art projects can sometimes succeed as works of art but still fail miserably as works of *public* art.

> Up until now it has been assumed that the criteria for good public art are simply the criteria for good art ... However ... we must build something more into our conception of good public art ....Works of art, and certainly works of public art, do not exist in interest-free environments. (pp. 90–91)

Still other art scholars have argued the point that, as a concept, public art is somewhat a contradiction in terms since works of public art must serve conflicting

interests: those of the artist and the art world versus those of the public (Selwood, 1995, p. 51–52). Hein (2002) agrees:

> public art is an oxymoron ... [because] modern philosophical aesthetics focuses almost exclusively on subjective experience and a commodified work of art ...By contrast, as a public phenomenon, art must entail the artist's self-negation and deference to a collective community. (p. 436)

In sum, public art, as a practice, differs from other forms of contemporary art practice precisely because it consists in placing works of art, usually created for private individual viewing, into a populist *open* arena that specifically invites widespread commentary and deliberation.

How, then, does this open public arena differ from other types of public but enclosed spaces such as museums and libraries? First, an important distinction resides in the simple fact that visitors to the museum have freely and deliberately made a decision to enter into the museum. We visit a museum with the very specific objective of looking at the works of art on display there. On the other hand, the public arena consists of open spaces, such as public squares and parks, as well as partly-restricted but easily penetrable spaces attendant to public amenities such as airports, train stations, courthouses and government buildings. People visit these kinds of public venues for all kinds of reasons that have absolutely nothing to do with art. When people come across works of art in such places, it is very likely a chance encounter. It is precisely the haphazard and unprepared nature of encounters with works of public art that make such experiences so challenging for many viewers. According to Senie (1992), the context in which an art encounter takes place often sets the stage for the viewer's interpretive process.

> In a museum or gallery, a select and voluntary audience places the art in a context relating to a known body of work—both the artist's and a larger art historical œuvre. An involuntary audience in a public place has as its primary frame of reference the context of daily life. Without an art context [...] a general audience must rely on literal comparison ("it looks like a baboon") or generic category ("it's art" or "it's abstract art") for identification. Neither is sufficient. (p. 240)

Furthermore, the public arena is not just a physical space. It is also a *conceptual* realm that extends well beyond the confines of any physical public place. In this wider, conceptual public sphere, certain types of knowledge, interest, and behavior are permitted while others are discouraged. The public sphere serves as a natural venue for discourse, debate and, sometimes, even public contestation on a wide range of topics of shared interest to both local and wider members of society.

In *Rethinking the Public Sphere*, sociologist Fraser (1993) presents and, then, refines conceptual definitions of the public sphere by addressing some of the shortfalls in earlier work on this topic. She begins by paraphrasing a definition first proposed by Habermas. The public sphere "designates a theater in modern societies in which *political participation* [emphasis added] is enacted through the medium of talk. It is the space in which citizens deliberate about their common affairs, hence, an institutionalized arena of discursive interaction" (p. 2).

Does public art meet this definition of political participation through talk? While few would disagree that art involves communication and, therefore, does indeed qualify as a form of 'talk', some artists still like to think of their work as apolitical. However, as often shown by the many controversies associated with public art, upon entering the public sphere, art can quickly take on political significance. Artist Daniel Buren (2004) reminds us that "public commissions are awarded by political bodies" and that politicians have certain expectations about public art (p. 104). Aside from the selection process, the reception of public art is also political. Hein (2002) makes the point that the audience is:

> no longer figured as passive onlooker but as participant, actively implicated in the constitution of the work of art. Effectively, the work's realization depends on the audience's bestowal of meaning upon it, a contentious social and political undertaking. The integration of the public [sphere] into the work of art is inherently political, and is as much equally congenial to both conservative and revolutionary ideology. Public art has been used to great effect promotionally and oppositionally by all political persuasions. (p. 439)

Finally, Knight sees the political dimension of public art on a more positive note. "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" (2008, p. 38).

Public art meets the definition of the public sphere that Fraser (1993) presents and hones in the aforementioned article. In her attempt to perfect previous work on the topic, Fraser challenges several assumptions about the nature of the public sphere. First, she challenges the assumption that, in the public sphere, all interlocutors are socially equal. Here she argues, "the bracketing of social inequalities in deliberation means proceeding as if they do not exist when they do [and that] this does not foster participatory parity. On the contrary, such bracketing usually works to the advantage of dominant groups in society and to the disadvantage of subordinates" (p. 11). Second, Fraser addresses the assumption that the public sphere is made up of a singular, comprehensive public. She contends that late capitalist societies are, in fact, "stratified societies [...] whose basic institutional framework generates unequal social groups in structural relations of dominance and subordination" (p. 13). She contends that the public sphere also includes multiple "subaltern counterpublics[1]" that formulate and disseminate "counterdiscourses" related to their "identities, interests, and needs" (p. 14). On this point, she concludes, "participatory parity is better achieved by a multiplicity of publics than by a single public" (p. 18). Third, Fraser tackles the assumption that deliberation in the public sphere must focus only on issues related to the "common good" (p. 9). Here, she makes the point that "sustained discursive *contestation*" [emphasis added] is the social process by which previously excluded topics can be brought forward for discussion in the public sphere and, perhaps, eventually become commonly shared concerns[2] (p. 20). Fourth, Fraser questions the assumption that the activity of the public sphere is

limited to "opinion formation" not involving any "decision making" (p. 24). In this case, Fraser makes the point that the development of sovereign parliamentary democracies has resulted in the establishment of a "public sphere within the state" (p. 24). As an outcome, "the 'force of public opinion' is strengthened when a body representing it is empowered to translate such 'opinion' into authoritative decisions" (p. 25).

The four points argued by Fraser and summarized above may prove useful for understanding some of the challenges associated with the practice of public art. Does the current production of public art and its reception by audiences include some of the conditions that Fraser denounces in her critique of previous paradigms of the public sphere? If so, these conditions may point to actual problems that need to be addressed in order to ensure better relations between artists and publics.

Public Art and the Public Sphere

The first assumption that Fraser challenges is the misconception that, in the public sphere, all interlocutors are socially equal. Within the context of actual public art practice, inequalities obviously exist between the producers of public art and the audience for whom the work is supposedly intended. In proposing and then producing public artworks, artists rarely consider the needs or desires of their intended audiences. Rather, they are usually intent on furthering their own development as artists. As reasons for engaging in public art projects, artists often cite justifications such as: (a) using public art commissions to support their other art making activities, (b) producing work for different types of spaces, (c) undertaking a new creative challenge, and (d) developing their ongoing body of work (Selwood, 1995, p. 57). To quote one artist engaged in making public art: "I'm working quite selfishly". Motivations for making public art often have little to do with the intended audience. "For me, to work in a public space is incidental. I am not trying to reach a public, as it were. I am trying to develop my work in interesting spaces," claims a second artist (p. 57). In addition, art professionals (jury members, art administrators, and artists) are involved in the selection and production process for public art from the beginning and during all stages of the project. Professional concerns related to the site, materials, production schedules, and production costs are usually what guide the decision making process. In this way, art professionals are clearly in charge and hold most, if not all, of the power. The role of the audience, then, is somewhat limited and essentially a passive one. In public art production, the public's response to the work becomes a consideration only at the very end of the process. This happens once the work has been installed and when, as it turns out quite often, a fait accompli is finally unveiled to the public.

The second assumption that Fraser challenges is the misconstrued notion that there exists only one singular, comprehensive public within the public sphere. This view used to provide support for the misguided belief that some level of public consensus about a work of public art was somehow possible. Starting in the 1980s,

in keeping with the emerging influence of post-structuralist semiotic theories, art scholars began questioning the notion of the single, homogeneous audience. Writing in 1992, Senie makes the following observation:

> the public is increasingly diverse, composed of multicultural ethnic groups whose right to recognition is now acknowledged by a society that long excluded them. The very definition of 'the public' as a meaningful entity is in question, as well as the possibility of an integrated public life. (p. 16)

In yet another publication, Senie and Webster (1992) pursue this discussion; they question why public art, as a practice, has chosen to overlook the complex and heterogeneous nature of the public it is intended to serve.

> The very concept of public art ... [mistakenly] presupposes a fairly homogenous public....Art was from the [American] nation's beginnings surrounded by an aura of ambivalent distrust and admiration, and it has been viewed by a heterogeneous audience with mixed feelings ever since... Seen from the vantage point of economic underclasses, public art is affirmation of their exclusion from power and privilege. (p. 171)

These points clearly illustrate how critical it is to have a good understanding of the audience, if public art projects are to succeed. Ongoing scholarly criticism continues to erode the concept of the monolithic public. A consensus is finally emerging around a new understanding: that of the diversity and multiplicity of the public sphere. Piechocki (2005) clearly makes this point by proposing that "the commitment to developing art for installation in nontraditional art spaces comes with the challenge of reaching out to a diverse audience" (p. 193). More recently, Knight (2008) sums up the challenge of public art as one in which "speaking concurrently *with* many potential publics, some specialized and others nonspecific, is quite different than talking *at* a single, monolithic audience" (p. 23). Finally, Kelly (2002) makes the point that:

> we need not aim towards consensus. Discussions of public art might rather start from the recognition that complete consensus is impossible because the public comprises many different subspheres, organizations, and institutions, each with many voices in terms of race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and class. (p. 457)

The third assumption that Fraser confronts is that only issues related to the common good are fit for public discussion. The notion of the common good "usually works to the advantage of dominant groups and individuals and to the disadvantage of their subordinates" by relegating the discussion of *lesser* concerns to small "enclaves" as a strategy for excluding these topics from wider public discussion (Fraser, 1993, p. 22). In the realm of public art, art professionals often use arguments intended to exclude, belittle, and dismiss the concerns of publics as one strategy for defending controversial works of public art. Here is but one example:

> Jennifer Dixon, a member of the Royal Academy of Art and a vocal member of the local [Ottawa] arts community, said she was fed up with putting up with the uneducated opinions of people who were denouncing public art. ...

"The decision on this piece was made and should have been made by people who know art and the direction it's taking, not by visual illiterates". (Lynn McAuley, *The Ottawa Citizen*, April 12, 1983, p. B20)

However, as regards what is and what isn't in the public interest, Fraser forcefully argues that: "there are no naturally given, a priori boundaries here. What will count as a matter of common concern will be decided precisely through discursive contestation" (p. 20). In making this argument, Fraser is making the case for unfettered debate in the public sphere. In a related matter, Senie (1992) exposes what appears to be a paradox in the way that public art programs have often been conducted. She does this simply by asking: "How can something be both public (democratic) and art (elitist)?" (p. 3). Danto also makes a related and equally insightful point about public art and the common good. "The assumption has been that art is good, so it must be good for people to have it, without anybody making much of an effort to translate the goodness of works that are not self-evidently good into terms people can grasp and respond to" (1987, p. 119). Danto is making the point that contemporary art often needs translation before it can be understood. This points to yet another art world paradox: the idea that art is somehow a universal language. "The idealist theory of art as a universal language comes into direct and virtually daily conflict with the actual practices of the contemporary art world" (Senie & Webster, 1992, p. 234).

Finally, the fourth assumption that Fraser questions is that activity in the public sphere is limited to opinion formation and not to decision making. This assumption is tempting as an argument for anyone—an artist, an arts administrator, a jury member—who feels she or he must defend the jury selection process by which most works of public art are chosen. As an argument, it provides art professionals comfort in the knowledge that, while the decisions of juries can be the subject of heated debate, their decisions cannot (easily) be overturned. However, several examples of the removal or destruction of works of public art, such as Serra's *Tilted Arc* (destroyed in 1989) and Ahearn's *Bronx Bronzes* (removed in 1991)[3], serve to remind us that, in the public sphere, anything is possible. According to Danto, "one of the great failures in our public art programs, as dramatized by the strife over *Tilted Arc*, is that the public has been radically under involved and all the main decisions have been left to panels of 'authorities' "(1987, p. 119). Knight (2008) emphasizes that there are "persistent gaps and power struggles between arts professionals and institutions, and members of the public" (p. 107). For these same reasons, Doss (1995) concludes that it is understandable that some individuals "view public art as both irrelevant and a blatant symbol of their loss of autonomy in the public sphere" (pp. 16–17). Although in many cases, public art projects are financed by public funding through government taxation programs, members of the public are rarely represented or directly involved in the decision making process. "Professional interests usually prevail in the initiation and management of public art works, and...it is comparatively rare for people not professionally engaged in the visual arts to be involved in these processes" (Selwood, 1995, p. 242).

In the preceding section, I have defined the physical, political and social arena in which public art is placed, that is, the public sphere, and I have discussed how public art sometimes functions within that sphere. Audience expectations are often at odds with the realities of many public art projects. Hence, public art continues to be a fertile ground for controversy. In the next section, in order to explore this further, I present and discuss selected examples of such controversies.

POPULAR EXPECTATIONS FOR PUBLIC ART

In her report to the Arts Council of England, Sara Selwood (1995) concludes that responses to works of public art are predicated by certain implicit expectations on the part of publics. Selwood makes the point that the professional objectives of the art world are often at odds with popular expectations for public art. In what follows, five popular beliefs about public art (p. 249) are examined in the light of actual controversial public art projects.

First Expectation: Public Art Should be Recognizable as an Object

Space-related or functional public art projects, such as decorative brickwork patterns on building facades or pavement and artist-designed amenities such as park benches, are rarely recognized by publics as actual works of art[4]. That such works go unnoticed could be construed as a sign of widespread acceptance of the work and, therefore, evidence of a certain degree of success for this type of public art. However, such a point of view is only tenable if we accept the argument that the best public art blends in with its surroundings and goes unnoticed. Obviously, few artists would agree with this rather reductionist position. A popular expectation for public art is that it consists of stand-alone pieces of work such as, for example, a statue on a pedestal. Such works have the advantage that they are easily identifiable as art. For this reason, conceptual and site-specific projects also pose a real problem for publics: the relationships between sculptural components and the site itself, so critical for the reception and appreciation of site-specific artworks, are often overlooked or misunderstood by viewing publics. A case in point is Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* (1981). Unfortunately, *Tilted Arc* was a good example of a work of public art that stood out and got noticed. Indeed, the high visibility of this work may have meant its downfall. Installed in a public square surrounded by government buildings, the Federal Plaza in New York City, *Tilted Arc* was a 2 1/2 inch thick, slightly curved and inclined wall made of weatherproof steel, 12 feet high by 120 feet long (Neill & Ridley, 2002, p. 426). Richard Serra conceived of his work as site specific since he intended it to relate directly to the physical and social features of Federal Plaza.

As I pointed out, *Tilted Arc* was conceived from the start as a site-specific sculpture.... The specificity of site-oriented works means that they are conceived for, dependent upon and inseparable from their location. Scale, size and placement of sculptural elements result from an analysis of the

particular environmental components of a given context. The preliminary analysis of a given site takes into consideration not only formal but also social and political characteristics of the site. Site-specific works invariably manifest a value judgment about the larger social and political context of which they are a part. (Serra, 1989, p. 41)

According to Crimp (1993), *Tilted Arc* was political in that it was surrounded and, perhaps, even fenced in by the institutions of federal political power that were housed around Federal Plaza (p. 176). Furthermore, in reassigning Federal Plaza to a new function as a sculpture court, "Serra once again used sculpture to hold its site hostage, to insist on the necessity for art to fulfill its own functions rather than those relegated to it by its governing institutions and discourses" (p. 179). Hein (2002) makes the point, however, that Serra "meant to confront the public in a *behavioral space*" and that, while *Tilted Arc* did not actually preclude the viewer's passage, it did "cause the viewer to feel blocked. The experience of oppression was real enough, but Serra wanted it to redirect attention to its actual source in the mechanisms of power" as symbolized by the surrounding government buildings (p. 440). This last point needs to be emphasized: in order to symbolically interpret the experience of oppression that resulted from an encounter with *Tilted Arc*, the viewer had to be able to connect the work to a larger, conceptual context: the function of Federal Plaza as a site of power. It is unlikely that most passers-by would be willing or able to take the time required to think carefully about this in order to make such a mental leap.

There is little doubt that Serra intended *Tilted Arc* to be symbolically political. Is it surprising, then, that the decision to remove it in 1989 was largely the result of a political and judicial process that had little to do with the aesthetic quality of the work? Rather, it is significant that the very political body—The General Services Administration—that had commissioned the work in the first place was also, in the end, responsible for its removal. The example of *Tilted Arc* confirms and strengthens the points made earlier in this chapter about the inescapable political nature of public art.

Within the scope of this paper, I simply cannot do justice to all the many compelling arguments that have been made either for or against the removal of *Tilted Arc*. However, one last point deserves our attention. Richard Serra appealed the decision to remove his work to the New York Supreme Court and, in large part, based his defense on the notion of site-specificity. According to Serra, since *Tilted Arc* was site-specific, removing it would destroy it. However, the court ruled, "that to be public, art must be created with a recognition on the artist's part of *the people who constitute the 'public'* of public art, whoever they are. For Serra, this would have meant recognizing the identities and rights of the different publics associated with Federal Plaza in various ways (working, living, visiting)" (Kelly, 2002, p. 460). The court's decision depended on a definition of the term 'public' to mean 'of the people'; that is, the court's definition of public made reference to people, not to a physical location. Unfortunately, as Kelly also reports, Serra was defiant all along in not recognizing the public in this respect (p. 460).

Second Expectation: Public Art Should be Beautiful and Innocuous

A second popular expectation for public art is that it should be attractive and not offend viewers. In 1991, John Ahearn installed a commission, three figurative bronze sculptures, in a square facing the Forty-fourth Police Precinct Station in the Bronx, New York. The sculptures consisted of cast figures based on images of three young neighborhood residents: "Raymond and Tobey (a boy with his pit bull), Daleesha (a young woman on roller skates) and Corey (a young man with a basketball under his arm and his foot up on a boombox)" (Finkelpearl, 2000, pp. 81–83).

No sooner had the sculptures been installed, that controversy erupted based on the perceptions that, in spite of the fact that these were portraits of actual neighborhood citizens, the sculptures were "not appropriate as public monuments". The work was criticized for being inconsiderate to African Americans, stereotypes of youth involved in non-productive activities, and negative role models for community youth. In particular, the sculpture Raymond and Tobey was thought by many to represent a drug dealer and "that this would be clear to anyone in an inner-city neighborhood" (pp. 83–84). Within days of the unveiling, opposition to the work escalated quite rapidly and, after careful consideration, Ahearn determined that they should be removed as quickly as possible. Within a week, under Ahearn's supervision, the bronzes were removed and sent to a warehouse. "Ahearn predicted that if they were not removed, the works would be the center of a very damaging controversy in which he would be cast as a racist. He thought that things were about to get out of hand" (p. 84) and, therefore, he acted appropriately to protect his work, his reputation, as well as the community.

Oddly enough, in this particular case, Ahearn knew the community well since he had lived there for twelve years and, in addition, he seemed to have done everything 'right'. He consulted extensively with community leaders before producing the work. Also, prior to this commission, Ahearn had collaboratively created and installed other public art projects in the South Bronx that depicted local youth at play. These projects had been well received by the community without any hint of controversy. What made the difference this time? First, previous projects had not involved public funding. Much of the controversy, as reported by the local press, centered on the idea that public funds were used to create racist works of art. Second, Ahearn had quite unintentionally touched upon and triggered, what was for this particular community, very sensitive and intense issues: the community's relations with the police and with outsiders. The plaza where the work was installed was understood by many to represent a symbolic bridge between the police and the community: Ahearn's sculptures seemed to work against that idea. Third, nearby Yankee Stadium plays a pivotal role as a magnet in bringing outsiders to the community. It was feared that Ahearn's bronzes would only reinforce outsiders' negative opinions about the South Bronx (p. 84). Again, the reasons for rejecting Ahearn's Bronx Bronzes had clear political overtones.

Third Expectation: Public Art Should Provide Enjoyment, Not a Challenge

A third popular expectation for public art is that it should bring pleasure to the viewer instead of challenging his or her beliefs. In this regard, celebratory works are often highly prized. To explain this further, I will present two examples. Both share a common feature: they represent a sports hero and celebrate his accomplishments. The first is well regarded within the art world but rejected by the community in which it was installed. The second is well appreciated by the community at large but rejected by the arts establishment.

In the first instance, a public monument was commissioned in October 1984 by *Sports Illustrated* magazine to commemorate Joe Louis, the African American boxer, who was the world heavyweight championship from 1937 to 1950. Time Incorporated, publisher of *Sports Illustrated*, provided the funding required for the project to the Detroit Institute of Art (DIA) so that it could oversee the project. Based on a short list provided by the museum, *Sports Illustrated* selected the artist Robert Graham, well known for the accuracy of his anatomical representations, to design and produce the monument. Two years later, in October 1986, Graham's sculpture was unveiled. Detroit citizens were probably expecting a statuesque likeness of their local hero but what they got was quite something else: Graham's monument consisted of "a 24-foot-long forearm with clenched fist suspended within a 24-foot high pyramid of four steel beams" (Graves, 1992, pp. 217–219).

> Robert Graham's tightly focused realism and his use of the traditional sculptural medium of bronze make him traditional by art establishment standards, and the DIA and Time may have believed that this conservative choice would foreclose interpretive ambiguity. However, although Detroit's citizens apparently felt a rare unanimity in their agreement on the appropriateness of Jose Louis as the subject for a public monument, the process by which the sculpture appeared before the public and the image that was chosen to symbolize Louis were both sources of grievance for members of the community. (p. 219)

The problems of public reception that greeted the unveiling of Graham's monument stemmed from the spontaneous negative images that the closed fist and forearm brought to mind. First, the monument reminded Detroit citizens of the urban violence and racial tensions that had so often plagued the city (p. 220). Second, it also brought to mind racial stereotypes about African American men such as those sometimes assigned to "black fighters, whose achievements were attributed to their 'brute strength' and 'animal nature'" (p. 224). It is not surprising, therefore, that Graham's tribute to Joe Louis was received with such controversy.

The second instance also involves a bronze statue of a sports hero but with several important distinctions. In 1982, for the production of the film *Rocky III*, United Artists produced, as a film prop, a bronze monument of the celebrated but *fictional* boxing hero, Rocky Balboa. For the purposes of film production, the statue was installed at the top of the flight of steps that lead up to the Philadelphia Museum of art. These are the very same stairs made famous as a landmark in the *Rocky* film franchise since, in his portrayal of the boxing hero, Sylvester Stallone

had used the stairs as an aerobic training facility. Following completion of the film, Stallone presented the statue as a gift to the City of Philadelphia. Reportedly, the actor expected that the monument would remain in the same prominent and prestigious location. However, following much public debate and controversy, a new location in South Philadelphia was found for the Balboa statue: the Spectrum Sports Stadium. Seven years later, for the filming of *Rocky V*, United Artists Studios asked and was granted permission to relocate the statue, once again, to the top of the Museum's steps. However, at a press conference announcing the new film, Sylvester Stallone relaunched the controversy about the appropriate location for the sculpture depicting Rocky Balboa (Rice, 1992, pp. 228–229). In opposing the move, "museum authorities were once again accused of elitism, and the media eagerly picked up the ball and stirred up the old controversy, casting it in the expected terms of art authorities versus ordinary citizens, elite culture versus popular culture" (p. 229).

> The Rocky controversy coincided with [a populist] upsurge of hostility toward the 'authority' of the museum itself. Rocky atop the steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art stands for the victory of the disenfranchised outsiders of the art world over their snooty and elitist cousins. Hostility toward the hegemony of art world practices easily translates into hostility toward oppressive authority in general, thus the self-righteous tone of many of the articles in the Rocky controversy. (p. 234)

Because of its origins in popular culture, just about every North American is able to recognize and, furthermore, easily contextualize the Rocky Balboa statue as a representation of an iconic fictional hero. For this reason, the statue can bring almost immediate pleasure to those who encounter it. Whatever controversy surrounded the relocation of the Rocky statue was not related to its challenging nature as an aesthetic object but rather to the perception that, in proposing a second relocation of the statue, the aesthetic preferences of an entire population were being ridiculed and rejected by the artistic and the political elite. As for Graham's monument to Joe Louis, the controversy surrounding it probably had more to do with the exceedingly challenging aesthetic nature of this monument. Considerable effort is no doubt required to overcome the initial, rather negative associations suggested by the sculpture. For this reason, most viewers might ask: "Where's the pleasure in looking at this?"

Fourth and Fifth Expectations: Public Art Should be Representational. Public Art Should be Made With Traditional Materials

A fourth popular expectation for public art is that it should be figurative so that viewers can easily identify what the work represents. This expectation sometimes yields unexpected outcomes, as we shall see in the next example. The work in question, *Transformer Site* (1982), is also a good illustration of a fifth popular expectation for public art, that is *the value of a work of public art is reflected in its materials*.

Transformer Site[5] (1982) is the work of two artists, René-Pierre Allain and Miguel Berlanga, who worked together as creative partners in Ottawa between 1981 and 1985 under the name "A & B associés". The sculpture was commissioned for the courtyard of the new Ottawa Police Station following an adjudicated competition in which nine artists presented proposals for sculptures and murals for the new station (*The Ottawa Citizen*, August 19, 1982). *Transformer Site* was realized using reinforced concrete and structural steel. In keeping with the artistic concerns of their previous work, the partners' *Transformer Site* is the representation of a 20th century industrial complex as it would appear as a ruin to archaeologists in the distant future. A & B associés describe their work as concerned with,

> the monumentality of industrial architecture, the materiality (weight and resistance) of its construction materials (such as steel and concrete), the reality of these materials' decay, the mysteriousness of the still, nearly lifeless industrial ruins, and the narrative of the archeological explorers, A & B associés, who recover them. (A & B associés, 1984, no pagination)

If, at first glance, *Transformer Site* might appear as an abstract work of art, closer study of the piece reveals that it realistically represents a former industrial structure, now in an advanced state of decay. Great care has been taken in the conception of the piece to make each component relate to the other structures of the work, not only in formal terms but in functional ones as well. One can readily visualize how different parts of the ruin must have played a role in supporting a common structure, such as a pipe or a piece of machinery, now since long gone. One can imagine how different the site would have been in its heyday, with all the noise, the smells, the visual clutter, the activity (both human and mechanical) and, indeed, the dangers that one readily associates with a contemporary industrial complex. Not only is *Transformer Site* in a state of ruin, as indicated by its rusting steel and crumbling concrete, it is a ruin being reclaimed by nature. Areas of the sculpture are now overgrown by weeds; some parts, contrary to their initial functions, now act as basins where rainwater can collect.

The realism of this sculpture may have contributed in part to initial confusion about its identity and purpose within the wider context of the construction site of the new Ottawa Police Station. Both structures—the new station and the commissioned sculpture – were under construction simultaneously and, therefore, some people initially thought that the structures of the sculpture had something to do with the construction of the Police Station itself. As reported in *The Ottawa Citizen*, "Marika Keliher thought the concrete and iron collection of forms, called *Transformer Site*, was the beginning of the heating and ventilation system for the new Station". "It looks like it should be carrying a load" another passerby, Elizabeth Austen, was quoted as saying. "Gotta be something added to it" was the assessment of one construction worker (The Ottawa Citizen, April 6, 1983, p. A13). And so began the first of several cycles of public criticism of *Transformer Site*. Each cycle was interspersed with artists' and artists associations' attempts at defending the piece and the aesthetic standards it was upheld to represent.

Since then, criticism of the piece has waned and then flared up again a number of times. There was still talk in 1987—four years after the unveiling—about getting the piece removed from the site.

In sum, although figurative, passers-by often misread the *Transformer Site* as either part of a larger construction or, once it was completed, as an abstract sculpture. In the latter case, viewers failed to recognize the symbolic meaning of the work: in my experience as a researcher, this is a common occurrence with public art. Furthermore, *Transformer Site*, like the ruined industrial complex it was meant to represent, was erected using reinforced concrete and structural steel. This worked against the widespread expectation that works of art should be made from traditional art materials such as marble or bronze. Again, as in this example, complaints about artists' preferences for modern industrial materials such as concrete, fiberglass and steel, are commonly voiced by large numbers of viewers (Lachapelle, 2003, pp. 69–71).

Pandering to Public Taste?

In the previous section, I have examined five of the most common, popular expectations for public art. Having knowledge of these expectations and keeping them in mind during the selection and production of commissioned projects might be useful in securing the publics' support for certain public art projects. Nonetheless, for many artists and arts administrators, working within the boundaries of popular expectations would be tantamount to pandering to the tastes of publics at the expense of the integrity of art. Therefore, the art world might ask whether or not it is possible to keep publics in mind while still producing work that is aesthetically and artistically worthwhile. In the next and last section of the chapter, I present examples of public art projects that confirm that this is indeed achievable. In doing so, at the same time, I will examine the role that art education can play in encouraging the positive reception of public art projects. More specifically, I will focus on two useful educational strategies for engaging viewers as they encounter works of public art: the first is to encourage careful viewing and the second is to encourage active participation.

PUBLIC ART AS ART EDUCATION

Encouraging Careful Viewing

Art education is often claimed to be the obvious solution to public art controversies (Knight, 2008; Lachapelle, 2003; Piechoki, 2005; Selwood, 1995; Senie, 1992; Senie & Webster, 1992). It is doubtful that educational programming *alone* can solve all of the problems of reception and understanding that come with works of public art. The reality is that, in most situations, a viewer needs to make a major investment in time and effort in order to understand and appreciate a work of public art. However, there is no guaranty that passers-by will actually stop and take the time required to carefully look at works of public art. A major obstacle, then, is

the way in which the viewer routinely approaches a work of art. When it comes to public art, more often than not, it's a question of *aesthetics on the run*: viewers form an opinion about the artwork quickly and in passing on their way to somewhere else. Indeed, it's quite common for passers-by to overlook works of public art; if they do actually notice them, unfortunately, it's often only as a fleeting image in their peripheral vision.

Research into viewing durations. During a recent three-year period, I spent hours upon hours in a public sculpture garden conducting a study of non-expert viewer responses to works of contemporary art. The garden was located on a jetty surrounded by water on three sides. Was this not a perfect site for a captive and, therefore, attentive audience? Actually, no. Most visitors to the garden—there were hundreds every single day—came to jog, cycle or in-line skate on a paved bikeway that circled the jetty. Since the works of art were all installed in the centre of the peninsula and the bike path was on the periphery, it was quite easy for most visitors to go about their business while simply ignoring the art. One of the volunteer participants in my study had actually been on the site to skate hundreds of times but had never really looked at the sculptures. By his own account, his participation in the study turned out to be a revelation as he discovered, for the very first time, the artistic wealth of the garden that supposedly, over the years, he had become so well acquainted with. Indeed, the research conducted on this site was also very revealing for my research team as well.

In this study, we asked each non-expert participant to take part in two viewing activities using the public art in the garden. First, we asked the participant[6] to select one or more works of art and talk to us about them as if they were visiting a museum on their own. We allocated ten minutes for this activity. Second, we then asked the same participants to select only one sculpture, look at it carefully for five minutes and, then, talk to us about it for an additional five minutes. Once the data collection phase was completed, we compared for each participant the results of the two activities. In the first activity, almost all the participants chose to select several works of art and talk about them very briefly, rather than select only one or two works and talk about these in greater detail. Using several different measures, we were able to determine that the participants' performance in this first task was, at best, fair. Participants spent so little time with each work that their appreciation of it was rather superficial. When we applied the same measures to the second activity—this was the activity in which participants focused on one work only for a longer period of time—we observed a dramatic improvement in the participants' art viewing performance. This improvement was in the order of several hundred percentage points!

On the basis of these remarkable findings, we concluded that the participants were quite capable of responding to the works of public art in appropriate and productive ways. However, we also had to acknowledge that, based on the results of the first activity, it was rather unlikely that these participants would spontaneously respond to the full extent of their abilities if they were on their own. In order to perform well, the participants needed to stop, slow down, and take their

time: in this study, they did that only when we asked them to do so (Lachapelle, Douesnard & Keenlyside, 2009). Indeed, this should be one of the main aims of any art education strategy for works of public art: any signage, printed materials, self-guided tours, or pod casts should be designed to encourage viewers to spend as much time as possible looking at and thinking about the works of art.

Encouraging Active Participation

Another approach also appears to work very well. It consists in developing novel and exciting ways to encourage the publics' *active* participation and involvement in the creation of works of public art or in responding to these works in some significant manner after the installation of the work. Such public art projects adopt an unabashedly populist orientation while still managing to entertain serious aesthetic and artistic concerns. Knight (2008) comments that "populism is a matter of providing people with the mean to feel confident in negotiating relationships with art on their own terms" (p. 110).

Furthermore, a populist approach requires that the artist acquire and nurture a better understanding of the relationships between artists and publics.

> Populism is not always communal, although it calls for deeper awareness of our social relations. It is also not anti-individualist; in fact at its fullest, populism encourages independent exploration, development of personal viewpoints, and critical interrogations of our public and private selves. Ultimately, populism advocates for the free will and informed decision-making of individuals. (Knight, 2008, p. 110)

The next two examples will serve to illustrate how a populist approach to public art can succeed in novel and exciting ways. These examples have the following in common. First, during the conception phase of the projects, the artists kept their publics in mind as they worked; second, each of these projects seeks to engage publics in active participation as a means for responding to the works.

Cloud Gate. Anish Kapoor's *Cloud Gate* (2004) greets visitors as they enter Millennium Park in Chicago. It is a massive piece of public sculpture weighing 110 tons and measuring 66 feet long, 42 feet wide, and 33 feet high. The sculpture is fabricated from seamless, polished, and highly reflective stainless steel plates that act as a mirror for Chicago's skyline and the sky above. Its elliptical shape was inspired by a drop of liquid mercury and *Cloud Gate* looks like a giant jellybean with its concave side facing down towards the ground. This forms a "12-foot-high arch [that] provides a 'gate' to the concave chamber beneath the sculpture inviting visitors [to enter and] to touch its mirror-like surface and to see their image reflected back from a variety of perspectives" (City of Chicago, 2008, Cloud Gate at the AT&T Plaza, 1).

Cloud Gate excels as a work of public art because it truly engages publics by getting them to stop, take notice, and playfully interact with the work. Park visitors "crowd around it. People take pictures, laugh at their distorted reflections, 'enter'

under its 12-foot-arch and lie on the ground to marvel at the view, and spend considerable time with the art while repeatedly *touching* it" (Knight, 2008, p. 154). Just like Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* (1981), which we examined earlier in this text, Kapoor's *Cloud Gate* is massive in scale. Without its human-scaled arch, it could easily have formed a barrier, thus confronting visitors instead of welcoming them. However, Kapoor has clearly thought about his audience while designing this work and, as a result, *Cloud Gate* engages its viewers in playful and meaningful ways that wins them over to his artistic intentions. However, Millennium Park, where this sculpture is installed, leaves nothing to chance and its educational programming provides visitors with downloadable self-guided audio tours, free print guides, and actual guided tours (p. 154). While *Cloud Gate* is a good example of a populist approach to a *permanent* work of public art, the next example illustrates how a populist approach can also be highly successful in engaging publics with *temporary* works of public art.

Abitibi-Temiscamingue Symposium of Visual Art. In July 1997, over a two-week period, the 3rd Abitibi-Temiscamingue Symposium of Visual Art was held in Amos, Quebec, Canada. This was an international event bringing together over 40 artists and scholars from Canada, Scandinavia (Denmark, Sweden, Norway), Iceland, France and the USA to take part in a two-week celebration of leading-edge contemporary art. During the symposium, these artists produced a wide variety of works including environmental art and sculpture, interactive installations, Internet art, performance art and concerts.

Indeed, it is remarkable that this event could be successfully held in a town like Amos. Amos is, after all, a small northern Quebec town, with a population of only 14,000, and is located quite far from any major city. However, by any measure, the Symposium was a resounding success not only for the artists but for the local population as well. Early in the planning process, organizers intentionally chose a populist, community-based orientation for the event (Richard, 1998, p. 24). The stated objective for the duration of the symposium was nothing less than to integrate art into the daily life of the community. To achieve these ends, organizers sought novel ways to involve community members, not only as spectators, but also as active participants in several creative activities related to the event. This process started well before the actual dates of the symposium.

During the year prior to the event, several thousand people participated in the production of 300,000 three-dimensional cardboard snow crystals; clusters of thousands of these crystals were then used, during the actual event, as signage to visually identify the different symposium sites (p. 28). Participation in the production of these crystals resulted in a strong sense of ownership among those involved. This was clearly demonstrated when, during the symposium, vandals set fire to one of these clusters, destroying it in the process. Overnight, thirty volunteers worked feverishly to produce the 8,000 cardboard crystals needed to restore the damaged signage.

During the symposium itself, the goodwill of community was called upon in other ways as well. The town of Amos is located in an area known for its esker. The theme of the symposium called upon artists to create work that celebrated, in some way, this unique geological feature. An esker is a "long narrow ridge or mound of sand, gravel, and boulders deposited by a stream flowing on, within, or beneath a stagnant glacier" (Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 1993, p. 396). Amos's esker was formed about 12,000 years ago (Ville d'Amos, 2008, Un peu d'histoire: Amos de nos jours, 3). In addition to forming this esker, the glacier deposited several erratics in the area. Erratics are large boulders that are lifted from their original location and carried by a glacier, sometimes over several hundred kilometers, only to be left behind in a new location once the glacier retreats.

Under the guidance of project manager and artist Paul Ouellet, 350 members of the local population undertook to move an 18-ton erratic boulder across town using only the most basic tools: a wooden sleigh, wooden rollers and, of course, the brute strength of dozens of volunteers. The boulder was destined for a new location, the Amos Exhibition Center where it was to be permanently installed and engraved with the outlines of the hands of local children (Ouellet, 1998, p. 42). Over the duration of the symposium, crowds gathered each day as the erratic gradually inched its way to its destination. As a community-based undertaking, the erratic's journey across town brought together members of different communities (social clubs, business persons, artists) for an objective that could only be met through the cooperative actions of hundreds of individual participants.

This activity certainly served to underscore the communal aspects of the symposium. It may have also promoted respect and, perhaps, even an intuitive understanding and appreciation of the work of the symposium artists that was being undertaken simultaneously. In a sense, the erratic's journey symbolically mirrored the creative process of many of the public art projects undertaken during the symposium since several of these also required the public's cooperation in order to become reality. While both the signage and erratic projects were conceived by the symposium organizers as "interpretation tools", other educational strategies were also implemented including a daily 3-hour cable television broadcast, a symposium website, daily breakfast-talks and several conferences (Richard, 1998, p. 84).

Educational Dialogue

The two examples presented above make a convincing case for the argument that a populist approach to public art projects can and does work. To put this approach into practice, artists and public art administrators need to start with and maintain an awareness of the realities of their publics throughout the public art production process.

Art education programming is also a necessary component of any public art project. However, the art education process cannot simply be reserved for the final stages of the project. Indeed, probably the most potent role for art education might very well take place at the beginning of a project where a two-way *educational* dialogue needs to be initiated among the major stakeholders in any public art project: members of the community and art world representatives (Senie, 1992, p. 227).

Through educational dialogue, representatives of the community educate members of the selection committee about the social, economic, and political context of the community for which a public art project is being proposed. In turn, the selection committee educates the community, with the help of the community's representatives, about the objectives and requirements of the project throughout its development. Once an artist and a project have been selected, community representatives are once again called upon, this time to educate the artist about the community and its needs. In turn, the artist's role as educator is to undertake to educate the community, on an ongoing basis, about the features, the content, and the symbolic value of her proposed project.

However, the educational process associated with a public art project cannot end with the unveiling of the completed work. It is not sufficient to prepare a press release and materials for the unveiling and, then, leave it at that. The continuously evolving societal context of any public art project dictates an ongoing effort to provide appropriate and updated educational programming. In conclusion, the undeniable success of some more recent public art projects, those where the realities of publics are taken into account and where the role of art education programming is understood and valued, allows us to imagine and, indeed, hope for a future filled with public art projects that promote harmonious relationships between artists and publics.

NOTES

[1] As an example of a subaltern counterpublic, Fraser presents and discusses the American feminist movement (1993, pp. 14–15).

[2] Fraser presents the example of domestic violence to illustrate this point (pp. 19–20).

[3] Both of these cases, Serra's *Tilted Arc* and Ahearn's *Bronx Bronzes*, will be discussed in more detail later in this paper.

[4] I am using the plural form—*publics*—to emphasize the heterogeneous nature of the public art audience.

[5] This section about the work *Transformer Site* is excerpted from: Lachapelle, R. (2003), Controversies about public contemporary art: An opportunity for studying viewer responses. *Canadian Review of Art Education, 30(2) 65–92.* It is used here by permission from the publishers.

[6] We conducted individual research sessions with each participant.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Can you identify works of public art in your community that elicited controversy? What might have been done to address this? And, during what stage of production would the intervention have been the most fruitful?

2. Is controversy about a work of public art necessarily a bad thing? In other words, is it realistic to expect broad public consensus about any topic let alone a work of art?

3. Do you think that controversy can play an effective role in fostering democratic involvement and dialogue? Under what circumstances can the emergence of controversy become a positive force?

4. Can you identify a work of public art in your community that you believe failed to address the public in its conception and production? Discuss why you believe the work failed in this regard.

5. Can you identify a work of public art in your community that encourages extended involvement and viewing time on the part of the observer? If so, how does it do so?

6. Can you identify a work of public art in your community that currently does NOT encourage extended involvement and viewing time on the part of the observers? What would you suggest to the artist that he or she change to make the work more successful in this regard? In addition, can you propose modifications to the site or to the manner of installation that would encourage greater involvement of the public?

7. Can you think of a work of public art that you have seen and disliked and, as a result, would rather have had it removed? In light of the article, would you still have it removed or were there aspects of the work that you failed to grasp earlier that you can now appreciate? What might have been done differently to assist you in understanding these aspects?

8. In your opinion, should the Rocky Balboa statue remain on the steps of the Philadelphia Art Museum? Please support your point of view.

9. As you go about your daily activities, identify a work of public art that you had previously failed to notice. Why do you believe you had previously failed to perceive it? And what might be done to make the work more noticeable?

10. Should public art selection committees always have representatives of the public as members of the committee? What advantages and disadvantages might arise from this arrangement?

11. If public art selection committees are NOT able to have representatives of the community as members, what steps could be taken to encourage that the publics' needs (desires) are adequately addressed by the committee?

12. Do you agree with the New York Supreme Court's decision to allow the removal of Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* from the Federal Plaza in New York City? Conduct additional research on this specific case in order to support your point of view with at least two well-reasoned arguments.

Richard Lachapelle, Ph.D.
Faculty of Fine Arts,
Concordia University,
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

Essays on Aesthetic Education for the 21st Century

Edited by

Tracie Costantino
University of Georgia, USA

Boyd White
McGill University, Canada

Cover photo: Janus, the two-headed god statue, XVI century, the Sacred Wood of Bomarzo, Italy.

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AUTHORS' BIOGRAPHIES

Stephanie Baer is a former high school art teacher currently enrolled in doctoral studies at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Her studies focus on the roles of teaching identities in relation to the arts in education. She is the Editorial Assistant for the *International Journal of Education & the Arts*. Publications include book reviews for *Educational Review* and a self-published book entitled *Room to Speak* dealing with the importance of correspondence and interaction in the search for art in teaching.

Terry Barrett, Ph.D., teaches art education in the Department of Art Education and Art History, University of North Texas. He is Professor Emeritus of Art Education at The Ohio State University, where he is the recipient of a Distinguished Teaching Award for courses in art and photography criticism, and aesthetics within education. He has authored five books: *Why Is That Art? Aesthetics and Criticism of Contemporary Art*; *Interpreting Art: Reflecting, Wondering, and Responding*; *Criticizing Art: Understanding the Contemporary* (2nd ed); *Criticizing Photographs: An Introduction to Understanding Images* (5th ed.); and *Talking about Student Art*. He is editor of the anthology *Lessons for Teaching Art Criticism*, is a former senior editor of *Studies in Art Education*, and a Distinguished Fellow of the National Art Education Association.

Bradley Conrad is a Ph.D. student in the Curriculum and Instruction program at the University of Denver. While serving as a graduate assistant and adjunct professor in the Teacher Education Program (TEP), he also works in professional development with high school teachers. Congruently, he teaches English and a course for possible future educators at Overland High School.

Tracie Costantino is an Assistant Professor of Art Education at the Lamar Dodd School of Art, University of Georgia. She received her Ph.D. in curriculum and instruction at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and her M.A. degree in art history from Brown University. Her research focuses on museum and aesthetic education, especially the processes of interpretation and meaning making. She is especially interested in the nature of artistic cognition and the transformative potential of aesthetic experience as an educative event. She is exploring this topic in an interdisciplinary curriculum project funded by the National Science Foundation with colleagues from engineering and creativity studies. In addition to numerous published articles and book chapters, Dr. Costantino has served as the editor of the *Arts & Learning Research Journal* and associate editor for the *International Journal of Education & the Arts*.

Anne-Marie Émond gained extensive work experience in the educational service of the National Gallery of Canada while completing an MFA and Ph.D. She became a