

CONTEXT AND CONTROVERSY: the Incendiary Potential of Public Art

Public artworks, selected and placed in public space as the manna of the democratic process, routinely incite controversy and conflict. How can negative responses and controversy towards public art be avoided, and more importantly, should it be avoided?

The words “public art” are a bit misleading, referencing both public spaces, which can be specified literally with an address or coordinates, and its indefinable audience called “the public”, which could include anyone who potentially experiences the artwork over the course of its installation.

Public art is initiated by a municipality and placed in public spaces to provide free art for its citizens; most public artworks are installed permanently for a designated period of time. An artist is typically commissioned to create the work by a jury, which is representative of the interests of the municipality, and consists of engineers and architects who evaluate the safety and security of the artwork, community members who represent the interests of the artworks’ neighborhood, and artist representatives who assess the critical and artistic merit of the artwork.

Public art projects that are chosen because of their palatability and neutrality are often criticized as being bland, and can be perceived as not having enough merit as an artwork. In addition, a jury selecting a public art project based on its generic and “safe” qualities can be deemed as a form of censorship; at minimum it does not inspire or encourage new perspectives for the community at large, or encourage new creative frontiers for visual artists.

Despite the collaborative and transparent nature of the juried public art process, public artworks routinely incite a controversial response, which can divide community groups, polarize opinions, and even result in the removal of the artwork to appease offended community members.

What makes an artwork controversial? The complaints of offense refer to religious, sexual, or political nature, or generalized opposition: “it’s ugly!” Providing it does not violate any laws, personal tolerance level for art that depicts violence, nudity (once predominately accepted as a representation of the human ideal in public spaces, tolerance for figurative nude artworks has shifted over time), or outrageous visuals is an individual response. Personal tastes, cultural histories, and visual preferences vary to the degree of the number of persons consulted.

The expectation of the public should not be that they accept or even like all public art placed within their city. Individuals will find great meaning in some artworks, feel ambivalent to many artworks, and strongly dislike several projects. A successful and holistic public art program should aim to create and place artworks in public space that are diverse, challenging, interesting and stimulate cultural growth and discussion. Some of these works will inevitably incite controversy. Public opinion will evolve and change around permanent artworks over time as social norms, politics, and trends shift and change.

A public artwork that depicts nudity or aspects of the human body may be protested because it is deemed to be explicit, despite the prevalence of suggestive advertising, pornography, and

the abundant number of historical artworks that depict nude forms. Similarly, violent and disturbing imagery and appropriated or desecrated religious icons can be found regularly on television, video games, movies, etc. throughout contemporary culture without receiving a parallel outcry.

A typical response to a controversial public artwork is a random or unexpected occurrence on the surface of the art. It is important to consider that controversy surrounding artworks often stems from mitigating political factors that capitalize on the undercurrent of the public forum surrounding the placement of public art, with positive or negative repercussions. Issues relating to the artwork, including location, iconography, space or size, symbolism, and municipal funds trigger or highlight ongoing political struggles for power within community groups.

This struggle for power within the public sphere is often related to designation of authority. Those who have authority to commission artworks are often assumed to have the authority to define or determine what is culturally relevant in a community group. Effective public art programs often have a variety of programming to ensure that a diverse range of public artworks are created in communities. These include; permanent public artworks with varied styles and mediums, impermanent public artworks which encourage acceptance of experimental public artworks, community public art programs which partner artists and community members in the creation of an artwork, and education and outreach programs which invite discussion and debate to help steer and guide the curatorial direction of the overall public art program. This curatorial or objective approach to accessioning art in the public sphere requires a close feedback loop of responding to and integrating the available subjective viewpoints for a truly dynamic and successful program.

Public art has traditionally been defined as “art in public spaces or places” – this definition is obsolete as it neglects the dimension of time. A favored term is “art in the public domain”, which encompasses a greater scope of media in public art, including radio art, light art, performance, etc. and also conveys the impact of time on an evolving understanding of the artwork.

The context of a public artwork - its location, evolving meaning, and the effect of time - can change dramatically over the course of the artwork’s installation and presence in a community. For instance, the impact of controversy on an artwork often does not result in its removal, but in fact increases the value of the artwork and dramatically increases its profile, rather than addressing or solving the issue which brought about the initial debate. Over time, many artworks that were deemed highly controversial are now revered. Similarly, artworks which are controversial in one location (i.e. in a country or state) may be easily accepted or greatly appreciated in another location. Within the realm of a city, sometimes an artwork can be relocated and the controversy absolved.

Most importantly, controversy in art, and especially the realm of public art, is important in pushing and broadening the boundaries of culture. Controversial works can inspire new ways of thinking, doing and being for citizens. A city should expect and accommodate controversial public artworks and its related ensuing dialogue, rather than strive to cover or avoid controversy, and in the process a city will become a dynamic, interesting, and stimulating place to live.

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