

TAKING CARE: a position for the Conservation and Maintenance of Public Art

The development of Percent for Art programs has resulted in placement of numerous works of art in the public domain across North America and beyond. The contrast of the artworks with the environment of the city is often a contribution to its meaning and value, yet it is precisely this environment that places the artwork at risk.

The physical environment in Edmonton, Alberta is an example of a harsh Canadian urban landscape. There are four distinct seasons, with a long winter featuring several feet of snow and temperatures dipping into -30 degrees Celsius, a slushy and wet spring, a dry and acrid summer, and a tremendous fall where leaves and detritus fall to the ground. In essence, an art conservator's nightmare.

Contemporary artworks use a variety of materials and continually develop and utilize new methods of presentation, including plastics, vinyl wrap products and Plexiglas, LED and neon sources for light artworks, solid-state hard drives and audio systems for permanent sound and video artworks, kinetic sculptures, and interactive artworks. Public art conservators must have a working knowledge of these new practices and materials, as well as traditional sculpture, painting, and two-dimensional object conservation. Public art exists within both the traditional canon of museography, where conservation is conducted within the controlled setting, but also within the open, uncontrolled environments of urban, municipal, and parkland spaces.

The concept of public art conservation is "taking care". The first question to ask is, taking care *of what?* And *from what?* To address the first question, public art conservation should take care not only of the art object itself, but the concept of the public artwork, and its evolving context in the public domain.

When properly conserved, public artworks can dramatically increase in value and importance over time. Conversely, valuable artworks left unattended and neglected can quickly deteriorate to the point of being a safety concern for the public, render the artwork cost ineffective to conserve, require re-siting or even to be de-accessioned, and is ultimately irresponsible to the collection and the artist.

In conserving the concept of a public artwork, art administrators and conservators can collaborate with the artist to determine what elements of the artwork's inherent beginnings must be preserved and how they should be communicated to the public, in order for the artworks' meaning to transcend the potential risks of a limited lifespan in a perilous environment. As for conserving the context of a public artwork, using a collaborative approach helps with making decisions as to how much, or to what extent the environment will be permitted to impact the artwork.

When addressing the second part of the question, taking care of an artwork *from what*, the conservation perspective shifts from protecting the artwork from not only fingerprints and human interaction on the small scale, but large-scale interference, geographic impact, materiality, and alchemic or entropic processes.

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