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Responsible Criticism: Evaluating Public Art

by Harriet F. Senie

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Tony Smith, *Light Up*, 1971. Work installed at Seagram Plaza, New York.

The idea of responsible criticism is, of course, predicated on the existence of public art criticism, period, a body of writing that has yet to reach critical mass. There are various factors responsible for the present near vacuum. Public art operates outside the gallery system; it cannot be exhibited in museums except by proxy (drawings, models, photographs). And, most significantly, its economic function doesn't generate revenue within the art business. If it is commissioned directly from the artist, there may be no fee for the gallery. There are few ads and therefore fewer reviews.

One strategy for bridging these gaps is to link public art installations directly to museum exhibitions. The Public Art Fund in New York has been very successful with this approach: already in 1975, the Mark di Suvero retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art had a public art component extending to the five boroughs, and more recently the Tony Smith exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1998 was accompanied by five installation sites. Although this increases the odds of reviews, it is a limited, temporary strategy.

Public art attracts critical attention only when it is the subject of controversy. It is rarely reviewed with museum or gallery art—on the same page or even in the same section—at least not in New York. It's unlikely that public art will be recognized as "art" by critics, art institutions, and the general public until it is consciously reframed as "art." This article is intended, in part, to suggest ways of accomplishing that end. Certain factors pertain to all types of public art: the nature of the patron and the terms of the commission, the site, and public response. All, I believe, should figure prominently in responsible criticism.

Who is the patron, and what are the parameters of the commission? What was the role of the commissioning agency? Was there a selection panel? If so, who served (i.e., who was the curator)? The curatorial aspect of public art administration is rarely acknowledged, yet many administrators play formative and even collaborative roles, beginning with the selection of slides to show a panel and extending to conversations with and suggestions to the artist. While it is gradually becoming museum practice to note curatorial authorship in exhibition wall labels and some critical reviews, public art administrators (perhaps from now on better called "curators") generally remain anonymous to all but those in the field.

It is arguable that in public art, the site is the content. Most famously, the commissioners of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial chose a site on the Mall in view of the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument before they set the parameters of the competition. All sites have local, if not national, content established well before they are transformed by public art. Every public space has an evolving history of multiple uses, visual, social, and political, that directly or indirectly influence, if not determine, both artistic and audience response.



Michael Heizer, *Adjacent, Against, Upon*, 1977, Seattle.

Too often public art attracts all manner of neighborhood discontents, something I have come to think of as the "Velcro factor." Sometimes it is even held responsible for the general condition of the site. Here, a peculiar form of the "blame the victim" phenomenon occurs: if someone urinates on a work or defaces it in any way, it's the fault of the art. Federal Plaza, once the site of Tilted Arc and arguably one of the worst examples of urban public space (barren, without any amenities, punctuated only by an empty, consistently broken fountain), was so dismal that it was singled out by architecture critics as well as members of the general public as being at the root of the

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objections to Tilted Arc. 1 Would anything have worked at this site? Before we critique public art, we have to consider and articulate the pre-defining features of the site.

It would also be useful to ban, at least for a time, the term "site specific." It has too many meanings and is loaded with too much theoretical baggage.² And it is impossible for public art to be "site specific" for long. Since a public site invariably undergoes seasonal and/or developmental change, any work would logically have to be frequently or periodically redesigned to remain specific. "Site responsive" is, I think, an improvement.³



Calder's *La Grande Vitesse*, 1969, painted on civic garbage trucks in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

I'd also like to suggest a different terminology for public response. "Audience" rather than "public" or "community" implicates only those for whom something was created, "an assembly of hearers or spectators...the persons reached by a book, radio broadcast, etc." (according to a popular dictionary definition). Audience does not imply or suggest a larger political entity or philosophical concept. Arguably, there is no public or community in general, or for public art specifically, but there certainly is an immediate audience—those who pass it sporadically or on a daily basis. And there is an indirect audience—those who read about it or see it on television, should it become famous or infamous, or notice it as the backdrop for an ad.

Since part of the *raison d'être* of public art is an expanded audience, it is essential that responsible criticism consider reception. The general press already does, but not in a responsible way. Most reporters are happy to cite negative remarks or intentionally provocative comparisons, for example, relating two works in Seattle composed of stone—Noguchi's *Landscape of Time* (1975) and Michael Heizer's *Adjacent, Against, Upon* (1977)—to the then-current pet rock craze, or likening Joel Shapiro's proposed piece for Charlotte, North Carolina, to a headless Gummy.

Obtaining audience response is problematic. For some time I've used student field work to gather such information. Every time I teach a class pertaining to public art, I assign a "public art watch." For the duration of a semester, on different days of the week, at different times, students observe, eavesdrop, and engage the audience for a specific work of public art. Based on a questionnaire developed in class and modified for individual circumstances, they inquire about personal reactions to this work and to public art in general.⁴ Although far from "scientific," the information is based on direct observation over time—precisely what is in short supply for reviewers working on a deadline.

The best time to write about public art is not when it is first installed but after it has "settled in." It's important to observe audience interaction (or lack thereof) and to talk to some individuals. My students found that people were easily engaged (unless they were running for a train) and often had interesting observations once they got over their initial fear of expressing themselves about art. Interestingly, although people's reactions became more favorable once they were told something about the art or artist, often they had not bothered to read the information plaques, even those placed in close proximity to the work.



Louise Nevelson, *Madison Plaza Sculpture*, 1986, Chicago.

Public art agencies have a responsibility to the audience and the art and should find a better way of getting information out there. All manner of information is available to museum visitors—from wall labels to brochures to guided tours. Indeed, museum educators might provide useful models. Perhaps interns could be used to provide information.

Following the museum model of comment books, there might be a way to ask for responses initially, after a few weeks, and after a few months or years. In 2001, for the temporary exhibition "Points of Departure: Art on the Line," independent curator Julie Courtney provided questionnaires at each station along the Septa regional rail line in and around Philadelphia.⁵ Many people took the time to fill them out. So, it is possible to gather feedback. It's essential for all involved, including critics, to lose the "art gaze," to view things as a non-art-informed person might, without the benefit of the artist's explanation or even a general context for understanding.

Before we can determine how information about audience response might best be used, we have to know what is going on: if people ignore, discuss, or "use" a work in some way—or if they even see it. At the least, being informed is being more generally aware of how art functions in our public spaces.

Although public art is intended for a general audience, there is a general distrust of that very audience among critics and even some artists and public art curators. A popular work is somehow presumed to be not good (public) art. For example, in spite of the overwhelmingly positive audience response to the Towers of Light (possibly the most visible temporary work of public art in our time), I don't think there was any serious discussion or critique of the work as public art.

Responsible criticism should include a discussion of the requirements of the commission and the curatorial role of the public art administrator, an analysis of the site, and a consideration of audience response. Beyond that, critical parameters are determined by the type or model of public art. In all models, however, as with museum or gallery art, the artist's intention is a critical issue.



Tom Otterness, *The Real World*, 1992, Battery Park City, New York City.

Single object sculpture was the initial form of the public art revival in the late 1960s that began with the Chicago Picasso. Contemporary discourse notwithstanding, this is still a dominant form of commissioned public art. Works should be judged both independently and in terms of placement (or installation), much as if they were in a gallery (i.e., "That's a great piece, but it looks terrible here"). Public art as "art" presumes the possibility of an art-viewing experience. To be seen as art, a work requires a site where this experience is possible, where people can literally see it and possibly stop for a brief or extended encounter.

Away from the protective "art" frame of a sculpture garden or gallery space, public art is vulnerable to certain public uses that change or distort its meaning. Consider the well-known Calder in Grand Rapids, Michigan, whose silhouette is emblazoned on civic stationary, as well as on garbage trucks; and George Rickey's Triple L Excentric Gyrotory II in front of Coca-Cola headquarters in Atlanta, renamed Leadership by the corporation. Public art as civic or corporate logo (unless specifically commissioned as such) precludes its being seen as art.

In addition to use imposed from above, another kind of daily use often goes unremarked. Object sculpture frequently serves as a photo op—people often line up behind George Segal's Breadline at the FDR memorial in Washington—and as a jungle gym for its younger or more agile audience. (di Suvero's sculpture at Pierwalk is one of many examples.) If a sculpture has a viable base people will sit on it, as they do on Nevelson's Madison Plaza Sculpture in Chicago. While it's not clear if this makes the art more or less visible, it clearly signals a lack of seating in the urban environment.

For public art as art to work it must be visible, must be perceived by its immediate audience. Its apparent widespread, if not pervasive, invisibility is comparable to that of familiar works in a museum's permanent collection, which go unnoticed unless they are rearranged or moved to an unfamiliar space. Obviously this is not an option for public art. But a sculpture that moves often serves to attract audience attention. George Rhoads's 42nd Street Ballroom (1983) in New York City's Port Authority Bus Terminal is surrounded when it is operative, but people ignore it when nothing moves. Because not all public sculpture is kinetic, we are back to the central issue: What will make public art more visible to its immediate audience?

Some public work seems to do better, it is more accessible or user-friendly, without "dumbing down" or depending on signage. Tom Otterness takes an installation approach in his scattering of pieces throughout the New York City subway station at 14th Street on the A, E, and C lines, much as he did in *The Real World* in Hudson River Park in downtown New York. Imbued with narrative content, his small figures transform their space in subtle ways, their atypical placement providing ongoing elements of surprise. It's hard to over-estimate the effectiveness of surprise in public art, especially since it often goes hand in hand with delight.

Public art today consists of an array of functional works, encompassing (intended) seating, fences, bridges, outdoor lighting, clocks—any and all imaginable street furniture—and even entire sites. This model is based on a pragmatic as well as aesthetic response to site, compensating for a perceived lack of urban amenities. The works at Battery Park City in New York address this paradigm. At North Cove, Scott Burton and Siah Armajani, working with architect Cesar Pelli, designed an urban waterfront plaza with a sculptural element evocative of a lighthouse, ample seating, and a fence inscribed with lines of poetry. Indeed, at North Cove there is an adjacent park designed by landscape architect M. Paul Friedberg. Further south, Ron Fischer designed Rector Gate (1985–89), a playful assemblage that provides seating at its base. And still further south, Richard Artschwager designed *Sitting/Stance* (1989), a furniture/sculpture that questions traditional forms of seating, while also providing a good place to sunbathe, judging from use. The question of whether a work is good (urban) design becomes paramount. Does it fulfill its intended function? Does it provide viable seating, lighting, or enclosure in a visually provocative way? And do people actually use it?



Richard Artschwager, *Sitting/Stance*, 1989, Battery Park City, New York City.

The garden paradigm is less common than its urban counterpart and raises distinct issues. One is maintenance. Although this is a major factor in the success or failure of all public art (a maintenance budget should be part of every commission), it is critical to a project that consists primarily of planted materials. Occasionally public art with landscape elements is called upon to address environmental issues such as erosion or pollution, raising other questions. Is this a good use of public art, or is it a whitewash? As Robert Morris remarked in 1979 at the opening of "Land Reclamation as Sculpture" at the Seattle Art Museum:

The most significant implication of art as reclamation is that art can and should be used to wipe away technological guilt...Will it be a little easier in the future to rip up the landscape for one last shovelful of non-renewable energy source if an artist can be found (cheap, mind you) to transform

the devastation into an inspiring and modern work of art? Or anyway, into a fun place to be? Well, at the very least, into a tidy, mugger-free park?

It would seem that artists participating in art as land reclamation will be forced to make moral as well as aesthetic choices. There may be more choices available than either a cooperative or critical stance... But it would perhaps be a misguided assumption to suppose that artists hired to work in industrially blasted landscapes would necessarily and invariably choose to convert such sites into idyllic reassuring places, thereby redeeming those who waste the landscape in the first place.⁶



Robert Morris, *untitled land reclamation sculpture*, 1979, Seattle.

Morris's caveat has other implications for the various uses/abuses of public art, but for this model, if public art is commissioned to perform a specific environmental function, then, in part, it must be judged on its ability to do so. We would be better served, however, if the art in question also called attention to the questionable practices that caused the problem. This is not always easy—as Morris found out. In fact, Morris's critical stance became part of a controversy. He cut down trees and blackened their stumps to mark the topmost boundary of the site as a reminder of its former debased state. This not only provoked

objections from environmentalists but was not necessarily understood unless you knew the artist's intentions. It was easy to mistake it for the result of a fire.⁷

Often called community-based public art, this model immediately raises the question of what is being judged: process or product? It makes sense, however, to begin with concept. Is this a good or viable idea? Then, did the process achieve the project goals? And, finally, what was the intended role of the product and what implicit criteria does it suggest?

When students in a graduate seminar in public art taught at the CUNY Graduate Center in spring 2003 considered the projects included in Mary Jane Jacob's public art exhibition, "Culture in Action," in Chicago in 1993, their responses were amazingly consistent.⁸ The vote for best work was split between two projects. Ifigo Manglano-Ovalle and Street-Level Video worked with neighborhood teens to produce *Tele-Vecindario*, 75 video installations installed in the streets and intended to reveal the concerns of neighborhood youth. In one lot, an 11-monitor-installation, *Rest in Peace*, was dedicated to those who had died in gang violence. Displayed at ground level, it suggested a cemetery with video-screen grave markers. Haha (a collaborative group consisting of Richard House, Wendy Jacob, Laurie Palmer, and John Floor, which formed in 1988, the year David Nelson's portrait of Mayor Washington in drag was arrested in Chicago) and Flood (a voluntary network for active participation in healthcare) transformed a vacant lot into a vegetable garden and created a hydroponic garden in an adjacent storefront. Envisioning bacteria-free produce as particularly important for those with HIV, the artists included a space for discussion and dissemination of information on local services available to AIDS sufferers. Haha saw this as a model that could be reproduced in other areas.

In both cases, students applauded the concept, the process, the product, and especially the existence of built-in mechanisms for continuation. This is an essential element of public art as social intervention. It has to have the potential for an ongoing, evolving relationship with its immediate neighborhood, to be more than a one-day (or night) stand.

In a critique of "Culture in Action," Eleanor Heartney remarked on the general dematerialization of public art.⁹ Jacob's next large-scale venture, created in conjunction with the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta, consisted primarily of public dialogues.¹⁰ In the call for papers for the 2004 meeting of the College Art Association (CAA), of seven panels devoted to public art, three directly addressed the public-art-as-social-intervention model. Two addressed publicly created forms of public art (i.e., created without professional artist intervention). Two more focused on the place and form of public art in our changing urban environment. One panel was devoted to the history of perhaps the most contentious form of public art: "The Rise and Fall of Memorial Sculpture." Few of the works discussed relate to the kinds of public art currently being commissioned. I see this as a critical split, comparable to the rift between theory-based art history and object-based museum practice. These CAA topics presume that the best or only interesting kind of public art is based on a critical stance and created by an artist together with neighborhood residents or entirely made by a non-professional artist. And, it is, by definition, temporary. The vast majority of public art commissioned today falls outside these narrow parameters.

Public art is not a substitute for urban renewal or social work, although projects may address or include such functions. Public art ideally creates better places and provides enjoyment, insight, and maybe even hope to its participants, viewers, and users. But it cannot correct deeper problems stemming from widespread unemployment and poverty, the neglect of public education and healthcare, and all the other social ills so glaringly ignored at the moment. Yet these unreasonable expectations are often implicit or imbedded in the commissioning of public art. Although different models prompt distinct criteria, I think that three basic questions should be asked, and probably in this order. Applying art-world standards: 1) Is it good work, according to its type: art, urban design, or community project? 2) Does it improve or energize its site in some way—by providing an aesthetic experience or seating (or both) or prompting conversation and perhaps social awareness? 3) Is there evidence of relevant or appropriate public engagement or use? For me, successful public art has to score on all three or it isn't. These, I think, are high but reasonable expectations.

Harriet F. Senie is director of museum studies and professor of art history at City College and the Graduate Center, CUNY. She is the author of numerous books and articles on public art. A version of this article was given as a keynote address for the 2003 annual meeting of the Public Art

Network. The ideas, developed over many years, took form in a seminar taught at the CUNY Graduate Center in spring 2003.

Notes: **1** See Harriet F. Senie, *The Tilted Arc Controversy: Dangerous Precedent?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002). **2** For a good analysis of its various evolving meanings, see Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003). **3** My thanks to Anne Pasternak, director of Creative Time, for this term and many other insights about public art. **4** See Harriet F. Senie, "Reframing Public Art: Audience Use, Interpretation, and Appreciation," in Andrew McClellan, ed., *Art and its Publics* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2003). **5** Julie Courtney, *Points of Departure: Art on the Line* (Philadelphia: Main Line Art Center, 2001). **6** Robert Morris, "Earthworks: Land Reclamation as Sculpture," in Harriet F. Senie and Sally Webster, eds., *Critical Issues in Public Art* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998), pp. 250–60. **7** See Kenneth S. Friedman, "Notes on the Environment: Robert Morris," in Peter Frank, ed., *Re-Dact* (New York: Willis, Locker & Owens Publishing, 1984), pp. 70–72. **8** Mary Jane Jacob, Michael Brenson, and Eva M. Olson, *Culture in Action* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995). All descriptions of the projects are taken from this catalogue. **9** Eleanor Heartney, "The Dematerialization of Public Art," *Sculpture*, March/April 1993: pp. 44–49. **10** Mary Jane Jacob, with Michael Brenson, eds., *Conversations at the Castle: Changing Audiences and Contemporary Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996).



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