Summary of Jury Comments for the 2003 PAN Year in Review

Patricia Phillips, 2003

I reviewed with great interest an impressive number and range of public art projects completed in the past year. Avoiding single-mindedness about content or conditions, I sought projects that possessed a poetic and critical urgency. Reasonably confident with my choices of notable projects to present and discuss (for many different reasons), I lament that I may have overlooked other outstanding work. This kind of slide review is an illuminating but imperfect process.

I often think that one of the most intriguing aspects of public art is that we encounter it while doing something else. Tom Finkelpearl has written persuasively about public art and attraction. I might add to the dialogue the subject of public art and distraction. There often is a deep ambivalence about public institutions and values. Public space itself is a threshold. People move in, out, and through it, but it rarely inhabited. Unsurprisingly, firsthand experiences of public art are generally episodic and often distracted.

Public art accommodates both deliberate and unexpected encounters. Some people (like me) go out of their way to see public art, but it is frequently witnessed as an unintended consequence of transit through a city during a commute, errand, or on a new route that brings us into art’s proximity. It is these inadvertent encounters that bring unarticulated and unanticipated dimensions to public art.

Public art reveals something to us. Of course, disclosure takes many forms, but it generally encourages us to move over, through, or around some boundary. Public art encourages connections of private and public, intimate places and municipals spaces, the individual body and the body politic, and the world and with each other. It offers moments of reflection or speculation when an image, sound, or space allow us to embody, in a unique and specific way, some of the vast and various issues of public life. Public art encourages us to become active witnesses of an animating idea, an aesthetic experience, or an urgent issue of contemporary life.

Henry Sayre, 2003

There will always be a place for public art that is monumental in scale and intent, work that serves as a focal point of community identity and pride. But such symbols of civic life are relatively rare, and public art today is less grand, less ambitious. It decorates our schoolhouses, our libraries, most of all, judging from this year’s entries, our public transportation. It’s not always very original work, though it’s often very beautiful, a lot of pattern and decoration—walls covered with decorative tile and windows filled with decorative glass. It’s not the artists’ fault. Those are the spaces that commissioning agencies make available for public work. And these spaces offer up only a few possibilities. I’ve tried to pick more original work—some pieces destined to evoke civic pride and some pieces of just downright intrigue and mystery, some pieces that capture the pulse of our modern lives. I saw a lot of good work in this exercise. What I’ve picked reflects my own slant on what’s really interesting—to me—beyond being just really good.