Janet Zweig

WOT FOR
And other questions on the use of public art

Janet Zweig is a public artist based in Brooklyn, New York.

House by Rachel Whiteread, 1993, East London, with graffiti [1]

I once received some "hate mail" following a much-publicized misunderstanding about the funding source of a public art commission. A person identified only as "Happy Day" sent an angry email that included this provocation: "Public Transportation may be funding the majority of your 'ART' but it could without doubt be used for safety for its riders. Do you really believe your pictures are going to stop people in Milwaukee from beating and shooting at each other on our bus lines?" After the initial shock of receiving this hostile missive, I seriously pondered Happy Day's question. My answer, kept to myself then but shared with you now, was "No."

What do people expect public art to accomplish for their city? What civic function should or could publicly-funded art have? Why do some people expect either so much or so little from public art, and why do they feel empowered to freely voice their opinions about it while staying comparably quiet about larger civic expenditures? Perhaps the relatively small scale and cost of public art, its "in-your-face" nature, and its apparent dispensability, plant the suggestion that one might be able to seize some personal control within the otherwise intractable material transformation of our shared social spaces. Effective activism is virtually impossible these days, yet here is a unique opportunity for one person to really raise a ruckus. After all, most public art controversies begin with campaigns launched by individuals.[2]

During the public hearing for the removal of Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* in 1985, Douglas Crimp, speaking on its behalf, said, "[This] is a hearing convened by a government administrator who seems to believe that art and social function are antithetical, that art has no social function. What makes me feel manipulated is that I am forced to argue for art as against some other social function. I am asked to line up on the side of sculpture against, say, those who are on the side of concerts or maybe picnic tables." [3]

1. Commissioned by Artangel. Photograph by Matthew Caldwell.

2. The campaign against Richard Serra's Tilted Arc was launched by Judge Edward D. Re.

3. The Trial of Tilted Arc, a film by Shu Lea Cheang 1989. No essay about public art is complete without a reference to Richard Serra's Tilted Arc.

Whatever pure social function Crimp was imagining that a challenging work of art, encountered accidentally on our busy streets, could provide us -- whether discursive, philosophical, or aesthetic -- any such possibility seems long lost to us now. Post-*Tilted Arc*, the administering of municipally-funded art in the United States was preemptively and drastically revamped. Artist selection panels now might typically include government and business representatives, developers, and a "community member" (who is this magic metonymic individual who stands in for an entire city?) Arts professionals are also at the table - a local artist and a curator, along with an art administrator who may or may not have an in-depth knowledge of contemporary art.

As a result of these administrative changes, there has been a considerable amount of functional art and integrated art[4] commissioned since the 1980s. These works helped fuel a recurring academic discussion denouncing the use of public art for purposes at odds with most artists' and curators' intentions.[5] Usually the criticism points to the instrumentalization of public art toward gentrification, suggesting that the goal is to benefit developers and business districts. Art can be used as a signal of this change, one of a number of elements that contribute to "revitalizing" depressed areas, thereby pricing out poorer residents.

The composition of these selection panels inevitably caused a shift in the goals assigned to public art, and those goals can take the form not only of gentrification, but of other surprisingly specific requests. At the same time, beleaguered art-loving administrators are just searching for any practical alibi for art. Here are a few examples taken from nationally publicized competitions of things that public art has been asked to accomplish: "traffic-calming," "depict the region's rich history," "provoke visitors... to think like a scientist," "express respect for the judicial system," "function as a shading structure", and "cast a human quality to the State Employee Parking Structure." [6]

While publicly-funded art should certainly have different goals than art made for galleries, and different goals than privately-funded and/or socially-engaged art, these goals and the process of developing them could be reassessed. Are there other models of administering

projects that bring interested participants into the process? Can artists bring their ideas and expertise into a situation without either condescending to a group, relinquishing authorial control, or giving their creativity away to ambitions with which they don't agree? Could artists help define the aspirations of a project as part of their creative work, and could those artist-driven goals be more productive and resonant than ones devised by the selection panel? How can government agencies be involved in a process that includes an exchange of ideas instead of leading the artist to a preconceived conclusion? And how much more successful might such an endeavor be if, in the end, the artist was able to make a work that no one could have possibly imagined? Isn't that what artists do best?

Finally, what might have made "Happy Day," my Milwaukee inquisitor, feel connected to the creative process rather than separate and angry? In other words, how could the sense of empowerment people use to criticize public art be encouraged to put them on the side of art, to get them involved in an artist's process and thinking, or simply to open up a more productive civic discourse?[7]

4. Art has been integrated into architecture, flooring, hardscape, and landscape. This is also a way to save money by doubling up the budgets, and a way to avoid controversy by making art look like design.

5.Rosalyn Deutche. Evictions, Art and Spatial Politics, MIT Press, Boston, 1992, was one of the first of these critiques, focusing on the design teams at Battery Park City.

6.One might wonder why an artist is needed; these sound like jobs for designers and planners, though even they might be stumped.

7. Though Collette Meacher, in her essay Impish Acts of Sabotage, suggests that vandalism against art is a collaborative and mimicking form of creativity by the audience of the artwork. In Ehrlich, Ken and Brandon la Belle, eds. Surface Tension: Problematics of Site. Errant Bodies Press, 2003.

There are no doubt several new or possible curatorial models that might address these issues. There is one recent model in Europe and Canada of which Calgary's WATERSHED+ is an early exemplar. In *Locating the Producers, Durational Approaches to Public Art*,[8] Paul O'Neill and Claire Doherty describe this approach through several twenty-first century projects funded by cities in the UK, The Netherlands, and Denmark. They identify three defining elements of the projects. The first is "duration" which is brought about by embedding artists in a place for a considerable length of time, sometimes years. The second is the "charismatic agency" of a curator/producer to successfully initiate and produce the project. The third element is "sociality and participation" through which the artists live in and interact with the situation, site, and community. In this social aspect, the authors stress that artists and producers have no expectation of "doing good" and no outcome in mind. And the sociality is a two-way hospitable street -- the artists are invited into the community and the residents are invited into the artists' process. But this is not the community mural model; the artists do not cede their authorial voice. Instead they share their strategies.

There is also a move among progressive public art agencies in the US to embed artists in municipal departments. Inspired by Mierle Laderman Ukeles' 38 year residency in The New York Department of Sanitation, New York's Department of Cultural Affairs is establishing artist residencies in The Department of Veteran's Affairs, The Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs, and the Administration for Children's Services. These residencies will doubtless share some of the elements of the model described by O'Neill and Doherty.

WATERSHED+, supported by both The City of Calgary's Department of Utilities and Environmental Protection and the Public Art Program, which began in 2009, has many of the hallmarks of the European projects – the artists immersed themselves in the workings of the department; they stayed for a long time, and the results were open-ended. Since the artists were embedded in a specific agency with a range of engineering and scientific goals, there are things that distinguish this collaboration as unique. The artists and the agency worked closely with each other, putting the artists on an equal footing with the people they worked with. The team built a

mutually respectful collaboration and learned from each other; artists' strategies and thinking was injected into the collaboration. Above all, there was an emphasis on the idea that art can create an emotional connection between the public and a civic agency. And the projects that resulted were surprising and playful, poetically revealing to the public the hidden infrastructure of the city.

It's important to note that this type of long-term embedded work may not be right for every situation or every artist and agency working in the public realm. Most artists can't move to a new place for a project, and many artists are not as team-oriented as these projects require. However the model does suggest some powerful new possibilities for administering public projects. A commissioned artist, however they are chosen,[9] could be asked to frame the initial questions instead of being handed a problem to solve; artists' ideas can begin the process instead of filling in the blanks. Some of these initial questions posed by an artist in collaboration with an arts administrator might be about the site or the community, but others will be novel and unexpected; questions that can only grow out of an artist engaging with a situation or a site or an individual or an agency or a group of people. And eventually the artwork that is produced might live as a poetic question posed to the public instead of a solution to a prosaic problem. Artists are good at finding the hidden questions, and can eventually pose them through their process and its results. These open questions can be a fertile source of civic discourse, culminating in a myriad of responses from the public, even supplying new meanings to the question of "what for?"

8. Locating the Producers, Durational Approaches to Public Art. Paul O'Neill and Claire Doherty (eds.) Antennae Valiz, Amsterdam, 2011.

9. North American governmental agencies are tasked with being "transparent and open," developing selection processes that are inclusive and democratic. The selection of artists without a specific project in mind would require some complex development on the part of the administrators and agencies in order to match the right artist with the right project without a preconceived idea or proposal in advance.