Today's "Public Art"

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public projects across the land. (Though a strong case can be made, in principle, against *any* direct government support of the arts, the purpose of this article is only to address the negative effects of existing public art programs.)

Beginning with the NEA's own Statement of Mission, the prevailing rhetoric on public art gives lip service to the ideas that art is essential to man's self-knowledge and psychological well-being, and that it is a vital link in the continuum of human history. The powerful role of art in past cultures is stressed, and we are frequently told that public art adds a vital *humanizing* element to the twentieth-century's stark, depersonalized urban and suburban vistas. But the rhetoric ignores (or denies) that the most effective examples of public art from past cultures have a humanizing effect precisely because they depict the *human figure*, which has been virtually excluded from today's "public art" programs. (The NEA's token "realist" is George Segal, who "sculpts" by pouring plaster over ordinary people in various banal attitudes and is not loath to pontificate on the significance of the results.) In place of meaningful depictions of the human figure, the public today is confronted mainly with industrialized constructions, as cold and impersonal as the cityscapes they are intended to humanize. At best, even to advocates like Hunter, such "public art" is "oblique in content and meaning"; at worst, to its critics, it is totally unintelligible, even devoid of meaning. More often than not, for most people, it not only fails to humanize the urban environment, it exacerbates the sense of dehumanization and alienation.

The Serra Case

The public debate over Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* provides a classic illustration of the great gulf still dividing "the minority that accepts modern art and the majority that does not," as one critic phrased it. Installed in 1981, Serra's work (a curving tilted slab of intentionally rusted steel 12' high by 112' long) transects the elegantly paved plaza in front of an otherwise nondescript federal office building in downtown Manhattan. When ongoing objections from a host of disgruntled government employees and others who work in the area prompted the General Services Administration to consider relocating the work, three days of public hearings were held. *Tilted Arc* was variously described by its detractors as "the Berlin Wall of Foley Square," a "calculated offense," a "piece of scrap iron." The summary comment of one citizen at the hearings was: "It looks barren, it is barren."

Members of the "international art world" rallied to the defense of *Tilted Arc*, of course, generally praising it as a serious work by a major artist of our time. Asked to comment on the proposed relocation of the piece, the director of the Brooklyn Museum went so far as to claim: "The more controversy there is at the time [a work] is created by a tried-and-true artist, the more chance that it is a significant statement. Therefore, I see this as the destruction of a masterpiece."

In alluding to Serra as a "tried-and-true artist," the museum director echoed the frequently expressed view that the "art professionals" (appointed by the NEA) who had selected Serra for the commission had expert knowledge of the value of his work, and that an amateur should no more question their judgment than challenge the findings of a nuclear physicist in his field (ignoring, of course, that reputable science is based on rigorous rules of logic and verifiable evidence, subject to objective tests, whereas today's reigning "art professionals" adamantly reject any objective standards in the realm of esthetics).

Predictably, Serra has become something of a martyr in the arts community. The American Council for the Arts (ACA)—a prominent advocacy organization based in New York which has, among other activities, lobbied for expanded funding of the NEA—has published a blatantly biased study entitled *Public Art, Public Controversy: The Tilted Arc on Trial*. Robert Porter, ACA's director of publishing, states that the project was spearheaded by a graduate student zealous to "chronicle the great injustice" done to Serra. (Despite the dire implications of that testimony from art professionals who spoke *against* the work is represented. As we shall see, the stance taken here—denying serious consideration to any departure from the modernist orthodoxy—pervades existing public art programs.

The Role of "Experts"

From their inception, federal programs in the arts have depended on the "expert" advice of outside consultants. Vulnerable to the charge that government support might lead to government control of the arts, the NEA emphasized in its Statement of Mission that the Endowment *"must not, under any circumstances, impose a single aesthetic standard or attempt to direct artistic content"* (italics added). To minimize the risk of such control, the agency adopted a peer panel review process, in which all substantive decision-making—on grant awards, programs, policies, etc.—is guided by allegedly qualified members of the arts community, including artists, curators, critics, art historians, administrators, and prominent patrons. This process has been generally thought to ensure artistic freedom and maximum diversity of creative expression. To quote historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. (from the first annual ACA-sponsored Nancy Hanks Lecture on Arts and Public Policy, delivered in Washington last April), the peer review process "relieved the artistic community's fears of bureaucratic control" and "extended [their] participation."

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phrase, the GSA has decided, at last report, not to move *Tilted Arc*, because Serra persuaded an NEA-appointed [!] review panel that the work is "site-specific"—i.e., "integrally related to the masses, forms, and lines" of the architectural environment where it is placed—and that to relocate it would be to destroy its "artistic value." No mention was made of the fact that Serra has devised several *similar* arcs for very *different* sites.)

Nevertheless, Porter rather disingenuously claims that the ACA book is not intended "to trumpet one viewpoint over another, although the testimony presented admittedly weighs substantially in favor of the artist's position." Substantially indeed. Of the 118 speakers who supported Serra's position, 94 are represented in the ACA volume, whereas only 6 of the 63 speakers who argued for the relocation of *Tilted Arc* are represented. Moreover, the "expertise" of the defense statements is underscored by their being grouped under appropriate headings (art critics, art dealers, art historians, etc.), while *none* of the

In effect, however, the Endowment's dependence on "recognized experts" has led to a *de facto* entrenchment of the avant-garde in national arts policy and practice (and, concomitantly, to a virtual exclusion of traditional figurative art and artists)—since the big names, the prominent "artists" and "experts," in the art world today are modernists of one stripe or another. Their "vanguard" mentality is discernible in every aspect of the GSA and NEA public art programs, beginning with the very guidelines and policy statements.

One sure symptom of the modernist mindset directing these programs is their "blurring of distinctions" between art forms and their emphasis on "experimental" work. For example, although the GSA's Art-in-Architecture program is explicitly intended to integrate *fine arts* in federal buildings, the current policy includes not only forms traditionally encompassed in such a context (sculpture, murals, and frescoes) but various new categories—among them, "lightworks" (e.g., abstract arrangements of neon tubing) and "fiber arts" (diverse configurations of fiber strands or fabric hung from ceilings or walls). Even more telling is the breakdown of projects actually completed. Of some fifty-five individual projects profiled in Thalacker's book, for instance, forty-six were totally abstract, three contained extremely stylized or "primitive" representations of the human form, and one was Oldenburg's *Batcolumn*; whereas only five were realist or figurative works in the traditional sense, reflecting a close observation of nature. How, one might well ask, does such predominantly abstract work "reflect the dignity, enterprise, vigor, and stability of the American National Government," as stipulated in the Art-in-Architecture guidelines?

The language of the NEA documents is equally problematical, with a similar emphasis on "new genres," such as "conceptual" art. That term, not defined in the guidelines, refers to "art" in which the *idea or concept* (expressed verbally or diagrammatically), as opposed to the *form or appearance*, is the most important—sometimes the only—aspect of the work. This, under the NEA's *Visual Arts* Program—which encompasses Art in Public Places.

Among the Visual Arts review criteria, "innovation and timeliness" are stressed, as well as work reflecting "serious and exceptional aesthetic investigation." What do these terms, mean in practice? One such project, funded under Art in Public Places, is Joseph Kinnebrew's "Fish Ladder Sculpture," in Grand Rapids, Michigan. As described by the authors of a hefty volume entitled *Public Art: New Directions*, this "innovative approach to art and the environment" allows salmon to swim up the Grand River to spawn.

> The functional sculpture, which allows people to walk across the ladder and watch the salmon leap over the rapids, is a prefabricated mortar platform bolted to the top of the concrete, box-shaped fish ladder.

John Beardsley, a curator of the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.—who wrote the text for *Art in Public Places* (1981), a survey of NEA-supported projects—reports that Kinnebrew's work "fulfills both [Kinnebrew's own] objectives and those of the Department of Natural Resources." Beardsley sees such an "extra-aesthetic function" as one step toward evolving a public art that is both "pertinent and relevant," and envisions that projects like this may in time become "the paradigms for successful public sculpture." Never mind that "extra-aesthetic functions" of any kind are outside the realm of art.

"Going Public"

Just how prevalent this level of non-thought or "doublespeak" is in the field of public art today is made painfully clear by a recently issued volume entitled *Going Public*, prepared by the Arts Extension Service (University of Massachusetts Division of Continuing Education) in cooperation with the NEA's Visual Arts Program. Intended as a "workbook" on public art, this 300-page publication is the product of the "Public Art Policy Project" initiated by Richard Andrews, former director of the Visual Arts Program. Through three sets of two-day task-force meetings of public art specialists (selected with advice from—yes—NEA panelists) and a survey of information on programs across America, the project aimed to gather together into one resource "some of the best knowledge and experience in the country" on the administration and preservation of public art. A major impetus was the *Tilted Arc* controversy—a source of no small embarrassment to those involved with public art programs.

The introductory essay of *Going Public* sets the tone; it is entitled "Stretching the Terrain: Sketching Twenty Years of Public Art." Its author, Kathy Halbreich—credited as a curator and arts consultant (and member of the Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities)—served on the task force and was, in Andrews's words, an "essential advisor" to the project. Not surprisingly, given the title of her essay, Halbreich's sympathies lie with "pioneering" projects, such as the work done in the 1960s by Carl André (whose media in those years included bales of hay) and Richard Serra (whose 1967 *Scatter Piece* consists of ragged scraps of rubber latex strewn over a studio floor). Halbreich also admires Scott Burton, who "blurred the distinction between life and art in a series of activities in which he appeared dressed as a woman, drugged (to sleep at a gallery opening), or naked." (Burton, we are told, "wanted to make art of moral consequence.") As for the present decade, Halbreich reports approvingly on the work of "performance poet" David Antin and "sound sculptor" Max Neuhaus (among others), who are currently devising a project for the Miami International Airport. (Remember, all of this is in the context of the *Visual Arts* Program.)

With such an introduction, what sort of conclusions are possible? The closing statement of *Going Public* acknowledges that "contemporary art [more accurately, "modern art"] continues to present a challenge for the viewer"—meaning, of course, that the public doesn't like or "understand" it. What solution is envisioned?

> As in other fields where new advances may be difficult to understand but are, nonetheless, respected [another allusion to science], we must develop methods of meaningful involvement and education which enable the public to respect that which public art contributes to our lives and culture.

That is, the problem is not with the "art" but with the public, which must be "educated" to understand "difficult" work.

Raymond Kaskey, *Portlandia*.
[Photo: Richard J. Brown, © 1985.]

The people who will do the educating are, of course, the approved "experts"—whom Tom Wolfe has aptly dubbed the "art clerisy."

One Memorable Image

In spite of the misguided thrust of the influential NEA and GSA programs, some genuine public art *has* been created in recent years. No doubt the boldest example is Raymond Kaskey's *Portlandia*, a colossal figure created (under a one-percent-for-art program) for a major new municipal building in Portland, Oregon. Like all public art worthy of the name, *Portlandia* embodies and celebrates, in one memorable image, widely shared civic, cultural, and esthetic values. How did so traditional a work come to fruition in today's modernist climate? Not by public referendum (as Tom Wolfe mistakenly implied in *Newsweek*) but because the architect stipulated that the work must be a figure in the classical style. Had he not done so, the Portland Building might now display some vacuous abstraction.

Instead it is graced by the heroic figure of a young woman, solemn and benign in expression, with hair and drapery blown by an eternal wind. Half kneeling atop the entrance portico, she carries a trident (ancient symbol of the sea, to which her city is bound in commerce) and reaches down to extend her right hand to the people. According to media accounts, local citizens—apparently untroubled by the lady's anachronistic imagery or her titanic proportions (the crouching figure

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