



TEMPORARY AND PERMANENT PUBLIC ART



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Overleaf:
Thomas Mann; Synchronicity; painted metal; Behrman Park,
Algiers, Louisiana

Temporary and Permanent Public Art

Temporary public art projects, those with a predetermined life span, are a good way to introduce public art into a community. Banners hung from buildings and streetlight standards can provide seasonal or event-specific interest. Murals on construction fences can mask construction while they call attention to what is being constructed or celebrate an event or topic of community interest. Rotating sculptural installations can become tourist attractions for downtown areas, making them “exhibitions without walls.” Temporary installations can have a great impact for festivals and weekend events. Some communities have even allocated money to artists as “rent” for existing pieces or new works for a designated period of time, after which the artwork reverts back to the artist.

Many of these formats for public art have been successfully implemented in Louisiana communities, and other communities should consider such projects as an introduction to the public art process. Starting off with temporary projects is a good way to involve and inspire the community, engage different constituent

groups, and make an immediate and noticeable impact, however temporary it might be. Even temporary artworks can last in the collective public memory or through recorded documentation. Public art need not be permanent to have an impact. Public art is successful when it results in heightened awareness of and public involvement in the process of civic design and community development.

Temporary projects are usually inexpensive to orchestrate and relatively simple to administer. Sometimes donors can be found for materials and supplies (particularly with construction-oriented projects), and often funding for these projects can come from sources that never thought of themselves as “public art partners.” For instance, a seasonal event or festival may routinely announce its events with banners on downtown streetlights; fees for artist design services for murals, banners, or posters might come from the festival’s marketing and publicity budgets. Interior spaces in a convention center or airport can be enlivened with wall hangings or banners funded by allocations for furnishings or wall coverings. Murals on a construction fence can be used to announce the new construction; the fence is usually a construction safety requirement, and with donated materials, a few artists, and a summer arts program for kids, an exciting project can



Robert Warrens; Harrah's Casino; Poydras Street facade installation; New Orleans, Louisiana

easily develop at minimal expense. The civic pride and responsibility such temporary projects can generate will be resources your public art program can build on as it develops and matures.

Temporary public art projects may seem problematic because their budgets often do not allow for administrative allocations. Many of the same administrative steps are required as for more permanent projects with larger budgets, but there is greater flexibility. While budgets are usually smaller, origins of projects are frequently unusual, and time constraints are tighter, a resourceful administrator can seize the moment and put together projects quickly, fashioning responses that respect established program objectives while taking advantage of situations at hand. The administrator may sometimes need to streamline administrative procedures in order to take advantage of short-term opportunities; just be sure the streamlining doesn't compromise the public art program's basic tenets or damage the program's credibility with artists and community leaders.

Consider the benefits of temporary projects: many different groups can be involved (including children); the work has a predetermined life span, and then it disappears. While present, it provides a visual punctuation point, makes the public smile, and generates a dialogue about public art. And when it's gone, you hope the public will miss it and ask for more.

Repairing, Relocating, or Removing Permanent Artworks

Sometimes artworks envisioned as permanent must be removed. This can happen for several reasons, but

in each case the administrator should gather information, evaluate the situation, and determine whether removal is the best course of action.

When artworks become hazardous

Sometimes an improperly maintained artwork can become a public hazard and be subject to calls for demolition, removal, or preservation. The public art program can be caught in a controversial situation whether the artwork in question was installed by the public art program or not. The issues involved include primary liability (whose artwork is it?), the artist's rights, community impact, program policies, allocations of administrative time and financial resources, and public responsibility. Public art programs should clearly articulate their responsibilities and resources and not assume responsibility for installations over which they had no control without carefully considering the consequences.

Of course if a dangerous situation is evident, the administrator should do whatever is necessary as soon as possible to mitigate the situation, from offering advice on temporary stabilization to facilitating immediate removal of the artwork from public access. The administrator should not under any circumstance expose the public art program or its staff to a lawsuit. The artist may have some rights concerning how artwork is preserved in the public realm (an issue that continues to evolve and is beyond the scope of this handbook), yet the administrator's primary responsibility is to protect the public from any danger.

Public art advocates should be sure the dangers are real, though. Look to colleagues or to risk managers (some cities have them on staff) or

to someone familiar with the material(s) in question for help in assessing the situation and developing short- and long-term solutions. Having gathered the facts, public art advocates should work with groups or agencies involved to fashion the best solution.

When artworks are vandalized

If an artwork under the public art program's jurisdiction is vandalized, repair it as soon as possible; such repairs should be covered by the program's maintenance budget. If vandalism continues, the administrator and the program's governing board should weigh the costs of continued upkeep against the value of keeping the piece at its current location or in its current configuration. Sometimes slight changes in the installation of the work or its finish will prevent or discourage future vandalism.

Another issue to consider is whether the work is truly being vandalized. There is a difference between malicious vandalism (such as racial epithets or defacing an artwork with spray paint visible at 50 yards) and community ownership by inscribing initials in a piece, visible only at close range. Spray paint "tags" on public art installations by local gangs may stop if gang members know they can do their "tagging" somewhere else without fear of recrimination. This technique worked well in Los Angeles: gang tags defaced public park structures on a regular basis until the public art program convinced the parks department to let one park building be constantly covered with tags; the park department repainted the building regularly, and the public art program supplied the spray paint and engaged artists to work with gang "artists" to refine their skills and

techniques. Gang members concentrated their efforts in this one space, gained new awareness and appreciation for respecting public property, and learned valuable lessons about community life. Also, potential vandals might be less inclined to become active if they have had a hand in the process of creating the project in the first place or, subsequently, repairing it. Public art is about including all members of a community before, during, and after installation.

Public art should allow the public to get involved in ways that only the public can determine. Often this is in an additive way. There is a transit station stop in Seattle with life-size transit riders who are constantly getting new hats and other objects attached, depending on the season and occasion. The tributes and mementos visitors leave at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., are obviously examples of positive interaction with the artwork. In New Orleans, someone attached a Batman symbol to a glass window installation at a police station (an abstracted map of the neighborhood). Public “contributions” to artworks are not necessarily acts of vandalism: they are often signs of acceptance and ownership. And that acceptance indicates a successful installation.

Controversial artworks

Occasionally it may be necessary to remove an artwork because of lack of acceptance by the community. Administrators and programs can take steps to head off unwanted controversy by making sure there is adequate community involvement in the selection process and by making sure decision-makers are aware of any major changes from the proposed and approved design.

When there are objections to a public artwork after it has been installed, removal may not be the only solution or the best solution. In New Orleans, for example, before the public art program was initiated, a sculpture of Martin Luther King, Jr., generated widespread controversy and calls for removal. Many in the community had expected a “realistic” likeness of the civil rights leader, but the artwork installed was a more “artistic” interpretation. Rather than removing the work, however, another work that met the community’s original expectations was installed elsewhere.

Before any action is taken, the administrator should carefully evaluate the situation. First, determine the nature of the objections. How widespread and broadly based are the objections? Are hidden agendas or motives involved? Public art can be a lightning rod for a wide variety of issues, from race and gender issues to objections to funding for “elitist” art. Second, retrace the selection and installation process. If mistakes were made, corrective actions may be necessary to prevent the same mistakes from occurring in the future.

Negative responses can result from changes that occur between approval of a proposed concept or design and installation of the completed work. Minor changes may occur because of unforeseen site conditions or expenses. Artists may decide to use different media or to include three-dimensional objects rather than two-dimensional drawings. Artists and administrators need some flexibility to make adjustments in the process of creating the artwork. More drastic changes in direction, scope of services, or artistic concept, however, may require approval by the jury, the sponsoring agency, and perhaps other communi-

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ty stakeholders. The public art program and the artist should have the flexibility to pursue a “better idea,” but the selection process must be respected as well.

It’s important for the administrator to track project progress by maintaining contact with the artist, making studio visits, keeping up the dialogue with all parties, and keeping a written record of relevant conversations and progress reports. It’s also important to include a description of the artwork in the artist’s contract and to base the contract on a detailed budget for that particular project.

Even if the public art process functions properly, the community was adequately involved and the accepted design is installed essentially as proposed and approved, remember that it is not always possible to please everyone. An artwork need not necessarily be removed or replaced simply because some groups or individuals don’t like it. If it becomes necessary to defend a controversial artwork, seek the support of other artists, public art colleagues, collectors, and community leaders; emphasize the process by which the design was selected; and express your hope that detractors will find other projects more to their liking.

Relocating artworks

Relocation may be a viable solution for many of the situations discussed above. Relocation may also be necessary when property changes hands or building uses change, and public artworks installed for the original use or tenant are no longer appropriate. Instances like these can be opportunities for the public art program to rescue a work from imminent destruction and find a new home for it.

Administrators and artists together may discover solutions that allow artwork designed originally for one location to be moved to another. There may be little budget for these rescue efforts, but professionally relocating an artwork to prevent its destruction provides a highly visible community service.

When artworks are irreparably damaged

If an artwork is damaged beyond repair, it should be removed as quickly as practical, in consultation with the artist if possible. Though the artist’s permission to remove the piece is not required if the program or sponsoring agency owns the work, the artist may be able to provide helpful suggestions about what might happen to the piece, whether it might be repaired or replaced or should be removed. The public art program’s advisory committee should also be consulted and should be part of any decision. Financial issues are involved too (does the program want to pay to have the piece repaired and replaced? will this expenditure drain the maintenance budget?), and program administrators should be prepared to present governing boards with relevant information on costs, timetables, and procedures so that informed decisions can be made.

The Value of a De-accession Policy

All programs should have a policies and procedures manual, and one component should be a statement on de-accession. A written policy or procedure may not tell you what to do in all cases, but it can provide a framework for discussion and general guidelines to help the program, administrators, and governing board make decisions when unexpected

situations arise. The following are a few general issues that a de-accession policy might address.

Relocation

When should artworks be relocated? Artworks designed with one set of site circumstances in mind may not fit somewhere else. Yet alterations and reevaluations by artists and administrators can lead to solutions for giving artwork designed for one site a new home. Is keeping the artwork in the public realm the overriding concern? There will be some expenses, including the artist's design fee and retooling and reconfiguring the artwork for its new site, as well as administrative time and costs. If other parties have made it necessary to move the artwork, they should bear the costs. The program may not always be able to recoup these costs, but an effort should be made.

Costs

When an artwork is damaged, programs should assess both immediate and long-term costs of repair. Will such damage happen again? Can the program absorb this expense on a regular basis? What will be lost if the piece is removed? Can the current damage wait for attention until the next regularly scheduled maintenance work? The program cannot be held hostage by unreasonable and recurring expenses for maintaining one work. If keeping an artwork becomes problematic, the program should cut its losses and learn from the experience.

Natural life span

Sometimes artworks just wear out, particularly pieces that are part of a traveling collection: frames break,

materials disintegrate, colors fade, or the quality of the artwork does not stand up to the test of time. Like everything else, artwork has a life span. A public art program should periodically evaluate works in this light.

Changing community sensibilities and evolving issues can affect an artwork's life span, too. Public art often addresses changing issues of community concern, but when the issues are no longer relevant, does the artwork lose its relevance too? Keep in mind that public art is also about community stories and collective memory. Sometimes we need to be reminded of the chapters of our past.

Collection management

Collection management issues should not be ignored in a program's de-accession policy. Explore all options before eliminating artwork from the public collection. How to dispose of artworks is a difficult call. Storing or simply discarding may not be desirable. Selling public art may prove problematic. In short, there are no easy answers. But when the life span of an artwork is over, consider the price you've paid for the artwork as the cost of usage to date. Consider returning the artwork to the artist or placing the piece in a public collection of that artist's work. This would be particularly appropriate for an early piece of an artist's oeuvre; often a university museum or cultural institution will need such a piece in its collection.

Insuring Your Program's Collection

Most cities are self-insured, which means that objects in a city's public

art collection may or may not be replaced if damaged or stolen. Replacement funding may have to come from your program's maintenance budget. The issue of insuring public art has not been fully explored to establish a national standard, but it is something public art programs should consider. Over time, a public art program may acquire and commission works that increase in value. Insuring a public art collection may not be as simple as insuring a car or a museum's collection; the best way to begin is to discuss the issue with your organization's insurance representatives, insurance business leaders in the community, and public officials.