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Toward an Understanding of Sculpture as Public Art

Curtis L. Carter

Public art is work produced by artists for a public space as opposed to an institutional setting such as a museum. It is most successful when based on implicitly or explicitly shared meanings between the artist and the community, and consists of actions or works executed on behalf of the community as a whole. Public art is developed for particular cultural spaces and involves the participation of public officials representing the community in which it is displayed. Typically, public art is initiated and maintained at public expense and functions under public control. Some public art, for example the Parthenon in Athens or the Eifel Tower in Paris, acquires universal interest as when its symbolism commands universal human interest. Public art then consists of works of art, temporary or permanent, in virtually any medium such as sculpture, music, theater, murals, architecture, media arts, etc. that is intended for the public domain. Normally it occurs out of doors and is freely accessible to all persons.¹ Added to these considerations are cultural differences within a community fostering differing expectations. For example, in a community made up of diverse cultures the term ‘public art’ may evoke different understandings in different minds. At the present time there is no consensus about what public art should look like, or what forms it should take. This point is emphasized, especially, by the expanding notions of sculpture as seen in relation to architecture and landscape.

The main focus in this essay will be on the role of sculpture as public art. The reason for the choice of sculpture is that it is arguably the most common form of public art, and is one that appears in some form

¹ Siah Armajani, “Public Art and the City,” and Joseph Kosuth, “Public Text,” in Florian Matzner, (ed.) *Public Art, Kunst im öffentlichen Raum* (Munich: Hatje Cantz, Berlin, 2001), 106, 304..

in virtually every culture. It will also include a discussion of public space, public sphere, the artist's role and the audience's role in public art, and assessment of public art.

Historically, sculpture has been characterized as “the art of representing observed or imagined objects in solid materials and in three dimensions”². Understood in this traditional sense, sculpture is one of the oldest art forms, clearly embracing artifacts found in the caves of prehistoric times as well as objects produced in all subsequent cultures. Public sculpture has existed as landmark, monument, architectural embellishment, cultural symbol, and independent aesthetic object. This traditional notion of sculpture serves as a point from which subsequent modifications of sculpture as public art evolve. Today, sculpture embraces many new forms representing new technologies and materials resulting in installation sculptures, light-based sculptures, and other forms of sculptural expression. In at least some of its manifestations, public sculpture offers a bridge between cultural particulars and the universal, which can be appreciated by all persons irrespective of their cultural origin.

Sculpture and architecture both differ from other fine arts. Unlike music, poetry, or theater, which may on a temporary basis participate in defining public spaces from time to time, public sculpture and architecture, typically persist in a fixed and determined space becoming more or less permanent features of the environment. Whereas, the spectator has a choice to avoid a theater or musical performance in a public space, sculpture and architecture sculpture remain accessible at all times to people using the environment. But with electronic media arts including cyber arts installations, the permanency of sculpture, if not of architecture, is called into question.

John Dewey has argued that the primary task of philosophy for the arts is to restore continuity between works of art and every day events.³ An examination of public sculpture, as one of the principal forms of public art, lends itself especially well to this process. As a process involving the consciousness of the community in which it functions,

² (*Encyclopedia Britannica* 1958: Vol. 20, 198)

³ Rudolf Arnheim, *The Dynamics of Architectural Form* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 215.

public sculpture eschews aesthetic experiences based on privacy and uniqueness. It is grounded in shared experiences that contribute toward a sense of community. In this respect, public sculpture calls for a refocusing of the logic of visual understanding. It requires a public source for its meaning based on the artist's engagement with the community, to replace the private interior psychological meanings typically associated with the fine arts such as poetry or painting. Typically, public art in the form of sculpture exists in open space, in proximity to or inclusive of architecture or landscape, as in the confines of an atrium or other large space with ready public access. It is normally outside the walls of the museum .

Looking backward in history, The Parthenon in Athens and the Eiffel Tower in Paris will serve as important examples of public art. The Parthenon, constructed 447-432 B.C., stands as a monument to the aspirations of the Athenian citizens, which goes beyond the personal to commemorate civic and perhaps religious meaning. It embodies the common values and aspirations of the Athenians. Subsequently, the Parthenon has become a memorial to the shared glory of that exemplary period when Athens reigned as a center of enlightened and empowered civilization. To others the Parthenon exemplifies a collaboration of artists and the Athenian community that speaks to all humanity as a symbol of creative civic and artistic achievement.

The Eiffel Tower, constructed 1887-1889, arose under somewhat different circumstances. It is now a global icon of France, and arguably the best-known example of public art worldwide. The Eiffel Tower was created to commemorate the Paris World's Fair of 1889. In this respect, its role as public art was intended as universal in scope from the beginning. Initially, however, the reception of the Eiffel Tower was met with criticism from citizens of Paris and prominent French artists and writers of the day, some of whom viewed it as an eyesore and unsuitable for placement in the setting provided by Paris architecture.⁴ Despite

⁴ Roland Barthes, *The Eiffel Tower and other Mythologies*, tr. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 3-18. Wikipedia, Wikimedia, February 6, 2010. Some 300 artists, writers, architects signed a petition opposing the construction of the Eiffel Tower. Among these were the writer Émile Zola and Guy de Maupassant, the architect of the Paris Opera Charles Garnier, and the painters Jean Léon Gérôme, William-Adolphe Bouguereau, and Jean Louis Meissonier. The Eiffel tower was designed by Alexandre Gustave Eiffel, structural

these initial reservations, the Eiffel Tower is now recognized throughout the world as a symbol of human creativity and technological achievement and is also a source of pride for citizens of Paris. By 2002, the Eiffel Tower had recorded its 200 millionth visitor. Even today it remains the most visited and the most recognizable public art works in the world.

My use of the Parthenon and the Eiffel Tower to characterize public sculpture calls for a brief explanation, given the historical association of sculpture with figurative representational art. It is based on the assumption that there is no rigid boundary between sculpture and architecture, and no presumption that public art must be representational. Dewey warns against any rigid classification separating sculpture and architecture. Since historical developments show that sculpture was for a part of its history an organic component of architecture. He represents their relationship as a continuum that enables us to distinguish sculpture from architecture without saying precisely where one ends and the other begins.⁵ Nor would Dewey hold public sculpture to any narrow view of representation, preferring instead to view the work of art as an expressive entity.⁶

Rosalind Krauss in her 1979 essay, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," also recognizes the erosion of the differences between sculpture and non-sculptural arts such as architecture and landscape in contemporary art practices. In support of this development, she provides a diagram of relations between sculpture, architecture and landscape where humans impose their order on nature.⁷ Kraus's analysis shows how sculptural practices since the postmodern era have witnessed a transformation that embraces work such as Robert Smithson's site constructions, which combine landscape and architectural constructions (Robert Smithson's *Partially Buried Woodshed*, 1970 and Richard Serra's urban steel structures such as the controversial *Tilted Arc*, 1981).

On the architectural side where contemporary architecture assumes significant sculptural properties, are examples such as Santiago

engineer-artist and associates.

⁵ John Dewey, *Art As Experience*, 1958: 228-234,

⁶ See Dewey, "the Expressive Object," *Art as Experience*, 82-105.

⁷ Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October* Vol. 8, 1979:30-44.

Calatrava's Milwaukee Art Museum (2005) which was intended as much as a symbolic gesture toward building a new civic identity as a building to house museum operations. The same is true of Frank Geary's art museum in Bilbao (1997), which was built to revitalize the image of a dying city. Hence, there is no clear line separating architecture and sculpture, and increasingly landscape also enters into the mix as in the examples cited from Smithson and Serra.

Yet, two features of sculpture stand out throughout these modifications: its societal purposes and its monumentality. Among the philosophers who have addressed the question of public art, Jurgen Habermas represents public art metaphorically as a discourse between the artists and the public emphasizing discursive relations among persons rather than market or state interests.⁸ Its purposes include: to inspire citizens and promote a sense of community identity, to record and celebrate important events in the history of a community, and to generate public discourse. Aided no doubt by its monumental scale, public art testifies to the importance of individuals and events as expressed through landmarks, monuments, architectural embellishments, and other forms of cultural symbolism. Unlike art intended solely for private contemplation, public sculpture does not function as an independent aesthetic object. Similarly it functions outside the realm of commodification in the art market place.

Public Space

Given the complexities surrounding the notion of public art, how might a philosopher begin to address the issues of public art in reference to public space and the public sphere? For our purposes, public space and public sphere are of special importance because they provide a framework for understanding public art. Public space serves as the principal site for public art, and the public sphere provides the social context in which public art exists. However, these notions are in need

⁸ Jurgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, cited in Stephan Schmidt-Wulffen, "On the Publicness of Public Art and the Limits of the Possible," in Florian Matzner, ed., *Public Art*: 650. See also, Craig Calhoun, (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Chicago, 1987).

of clarification. One problem with the terms ‘public space’ and ‘public sphere’ is that they are terms with a history of considerable fluidity and diversity in meanings, depending on local political settings. In the very broadest sense, public space refers to all space that exists. However since both private and governmental institutions lay claim to space, whether in the form of governmental sovereignty or designated private uses, this broad designation is not sufficient. Public space more narrowly construed refers to designated zones within a community which guarantee free access to the public for engaging in personal or communal activities as recreation, conducting civic ceremonies, display of public art, free discourse, and other non-commercial and lawful activities. In general, public space offers a greater tolerance for the unexpected or free actions in the public domain. Its principal defining characteristics are accessibility and useability.⁹

Until the mid-twentieth century, public space when understood as a place for sculpture or architecture, was considered mainly as a three-dimensional physical environment in which some public functions might occur. Often, sculptural objects with volume and weight, in conjunction with architecture, establish the boundaries of public space and help define its uses. In such environments, the problems of architecture and sculpture are similar. Their common task is to physically and psychologically organize, fill, and give identity to space with the added value of an aesthetic solution. Sculpture, however, differs from architecture in at least some of its public functions with respect to the organization and use of public space, as it need not (but may in some instances) offer shelter or compartmentalize space for diverse functional needs, as does architecture.

Habermas introduces a social dimension to public space in his proposal that public space is defined by the discourse that takes place in particular cultural and political spaces. Today, much of the social discourse involving public space takes place by means of electronic media through the internet and cyber space. For many individuals active today, increasingly the main sphere of public space is indeed the computer screen with its access to electronic resources worldwide, replacing the traditional notion of public space consisting of actual physical space.

⁹ Res Ingold, “The right Time: On Using Work Materials in the Public,” Florian Matzner, ed., *Public Art*, 700.

Hence, in order to fully comprehend the scope of public space, it is necessary to expand our notion of public space to encompass electronic space as well as physical space. This expansion of public space to include electronic space requires as well a broadening our understanding of public sculpture to include works generated by means of electronic media. Hence, public art works delivered over internet and cyberspace thus may also be candidates for public sculpture.

Extending public art and the notion of public space through technology requires that we think of electronic space as public space rather than merely private. This means that although we sit in private, or in isolation while engaging the internet, the experiences available through the internet nevertheless connects the viewer visually and conceptually with points of reference that may be shared by anyone who chooses to participate in the same electronic frame. Electronic space may not entirely fulfill the condition of accessibility claimed for three dimensional public space when it refers to actual physical space. However, given the widespread and growing accessibility of worldwide access to the internet, it is difficult to imagine that access will be a major drawback to public art in this new media. One example which comes to mind is work placed on U Tube, which has virtually become a public garden of media works accessible to all with access to an internet receiver and screen.

Public Sphere

It is also necessary to explore the notion of a public sphere in reference to public art. A first task might be to investigate further the distinction between public and private as this distinction applies to public art. In general, 'private' refers to the sphere of individuals and families, whereas 'public' refers to the sphere in which all stakeholders in a community have an interest and are entitled to some say either directly or by proxy. Hence, commissioning a portrait for enjoyments of one's self and family, or friends does not as such count as public art. A decision of an agency of the government such as the United States Congress, to commission a work and a site to honor the soldiers lost in the Vietnam War would result in a case of public sculpture. For the moment, new problems of differentiating private and public are

exacerbated by unresolved issues such as those relating to the use of images accessed on a website through the public spaces of the internet. Ultimately, it may turn out that whatever is private is dependent on the public sphere and *vice versa*; however, it is useful for our purposes to assume that these notions indicate some important differences.

Of course, the term ‘public sphere’ extends over a range of uses depending on the particular cultural context in which it occurs. For instance, the public sphere in a monarchy might refer to ownership and control by the reigning monarch and accessible at the pleasure of the monarch, whereas in a democracy ownership and access reside in the hands of the people, or a representative government acting on their behalf. Within such entities there exist different segments of society characterized variously as the bourgeois and the proletariat, or the ruling class and the working class, each with differing interests and some shared interests.

Add to these broad categories influencing our understanding of a public sphere, the influences of the media, interest groups, political parties, a multicultural population, government bureaucracies, the legal system, and *ad hoc* protest groups centered on a particular issue that rise up from time, all of which may contribute to the process of defining the public sphere. Variances of this sort suggest differing and perhaps competing interests in the public sphere not easily subsumable under a common practice. Such competing interests might easily lead to different roles and expectations for public art. Hence no single view of a public sphere, or the art represented there, will satisfy for long the needs of a multi-faceted dynamic urban multicultural society.

As a result, rapidly changing communities may outgrow site and time-specific public art, as the political and ideological frames and other societal needs for symbolic representation change. One had only to visit Moscow or Saint Petersburg and view the massive piles of discarded sculptures of former party heroes just after the Communist government was toppled in 1991 to appreciate this point. Even what were once bold and innovative interventions intended to bring life to sterile urban settings in the United States, have now become problematic. For example, the “once optimistic beacons of urban rejuvenation” developed by the architect Lawrence Halprin, who provided notable public art projects throughout American cities during

the 1970s and 1980s, “are now suffering from neglect and abandonment and are considered by some critics to be dated modernist eyesores out of step with their cities.”¹⁰ In Denver, Halprin’s “Skyline Park,” intended as a “place of downtown quiet,” gave way to downtown business interests and has been largely demolished. Halprin’s “United Nations Plaza” in San Francisco, which had become a magnet for homeless and other marginalized populations, is surrounded by yellow chains and has recently been a candidate for demolition. These examples, and the countless forgotten civic heroes on horseback in parks and plazas across the world, attest to the impermanence of any particular public art work. Effective public art requires constant renewal in order to serve the symbolic needs of the public sphere in which it resides.¹¹

The Artist’s Role

The next consideration for our purposes here is to look at the particular role of the artist in public art. First the artist, when charged with making a public art, acts in the name of the community. One important role of public sculpture has been to create images that mythologize history. Operating in a utopian mode, public art might aim at fostering unity among people by idealizing the sentiments of the community, or by focusing on some areas of common agreement. In the past, heroic sculptures featuring beloved national figures were used to instill feelings of patriotism and national unity. However, in an age of anti-heroism a different approach is called for. One of the most successful anti-heroic sculptures is the Vietnam Memorial constructed in 1982, designed by Maya Linn and located on the mall in Washington, D. C. Here it was necessary to address conflicting sentiments including the feelings of unappreciated soldiers and the public’s divided views over an unpopular war. Despite an initial public outcry of opposition, the Vietnam Memorial has become an embracing symbol of “national mourning and reconciliation” as well as a “critical parody,”

¹⁰ Patricia Leigh Brown, “For a shaper of Landscapes,”: New York Times, July 10, 2003.

¹¹ For further discussion of art and the public sphere see W. J. T. Mitchell, ed., *Art and the Public Sphere*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990, 1992.

reversing the usual role of war monuments.¹² It has managed to satisfy the needs of many diverse groups resulting in a stream of visitors who often participate in the memorial by leaving gifts honoring the soldiers named on the wall.

Changes in the contemporary mood have generated increasing interest in the critical function of public art. As public art assumes a role of social critique, this means a shift in the artist's function from one who marks important social events of historical significance, to the role of artist as activist. In its critical function, public art becomes a type of symbolic intervention, and it often confronts history, politics and society forcing a reexamination of painful moments in history. In 1988, Hans Haacke contributed the work, *Und ihr habt gesiegt* (And You Were Victorious After All), to an exhibition initiated by the citizens of Graz, Austria called "Points of Reference 38-88." The exhibition was intended to challenge artists to "confront history, politics, and society" and remind the citizens of the atrocities committed fifty years earlier. Haacke's sculpture recreated the Nazi draping of the Column of the Virgin Mary (located in Graz) and carried the same inscription, "And You were Victorious After All." Haacke's commissioned public art was destroyed by a Neo-Nazi fire bomber shortly after it was installed. The sculptor's work generated an extreme reaction; it evoked powerful and unresolved feelings carried forth from the Nazi era about which there is still no consensus.¹³

Such incidents raise broader questions concerning the artist's role in creating public art. In entering the realm of public art, artists leave the familiar settings of studios, galleries and museums with their more or less prescribed conventions for interacting with the public through commercial exchange and aesthetics appreciation. In effect, the artist who chooses to participate in creating public art is in a unique and problematic role. The romantic view of the artist as an individual creator endowed with special gifts for making art, as directed primarily by the artist's own individual ideas and sensibilities in acts of self-expression, does not easily fit into the notion of contemporary ideals of public sculpture. Conflict between artist's personal aesthetic vision and community interests, particularly in a situation involving cultural

¹² Mitchell, *Art and the Public Sphere* 1992, 3.

¹³ Andrew Causey, *Sculpture Since 1945* (Oxford university Press, 1998) 219.

differences, is well illustrated by Christo and Jean-Claude's "Umbrellas" project 1984-1991. Beautiful yellow umbrellas were placed over landscapes in Japan around the Sato River seventy-five miles north of Tokyo and in an uncultivated grazing area known as the El Tejon Pass fifty miles north of Los Angeles. From the perspective of the artists this public art work was an attempt to create beauty based on imposing their own personal aesthetic vision realized in locating the yellow umbrellas on the landscape. But both the native Americans and the Japanese, who were operating on other aesthetic visions, saw an already perfect order in nature, in which their spirituality is grounded, being violated by the intrusive Umbrellas.

For the artist to assume this traditional role of individual creator with its claim to special insights and privileges without taking into account guidance and participation of the community will surely lead to problems. This strategy is almost certain to collide with the process driven decision-making world of government and with the views of the community where the art is placed. Should the artist then simply absorb and represent the views of the community through non-controversial images? Or is the artist to assume the role of social critic and proceed according to insights deriving from her/his inner vision? Expecting the artist to become a spokesperson for the community, or a social critic addressing significant and sensitive aesthetic, political, and social issues has become increasingly problematic in culturally diverse, ideologically driven, advanced technological societies. This process is notably tenuous in an environment where substantial doubt exists about whether artists have the necessary knowledge or wisdom to dispense truth, and where interpretations of history shift rapidly with changes in ideology. From the artist's perspective there is also the risk of her/his becoming merely an instrument of propaganda for the state, or for one of the many interest groups that make up the community.

When involved in the creation of public art, the artist becomes part of a team consisting of the public officials and others in the community responsible for the work. Unlike art created as an individual where the artist enjoys a great deal of freedom, public art demands a high degree of accountability to the needs and interests of the community where it occurs. These circumstances point to a need to expand upon notions of the artist and artistic creativity and perhaps to consider other models

more suited to a democratic society. In a democratic society, public officials are charged with the responsibility for decisions concerning public sculpture and must take into account a diverse range of community interests and points of view. To put the matter succinctly, public art consists of a political act involving a complex series of negotiations with the community including debate and discussion, as well as administrative and legal processes.¹⁴

Does this mean that the romantic notion of the artist driven by intuitive consciousness has become obsolete, or that it does not apply to public art? Paul Feyerabend has argued that the social aspects of creativity mandate that artists as well as scientists be subject to guidance and supervision of their fellow citizens.¹⁵ This view is consistent with the ancient Greek notion of community centered democracy as distinct from the modern Western individually centered democracy. And, with less democratic political aims in mind, Plato might have agreed. Feyerabend also questions the model of creativity on which the romantic artist presumably derives the authority for individual actions, preferring instead a holistic notion of creativity as an interactive process based on teamwork and respect for nature. It is not necessary to resolve the polarity between individual and cooperative models of creativity. It is, however, useful to note that successful public sculpture, past and present, is typically a result of a collaborative effort involving the contributions of artists, the state, and the immediate community.

The current climate for public art suggests a need for directing the processes guiding public art toward greater community participation. It suggests that public art is not about artists working in isolation to make beautiful works according to a personal aesthetic, or about artists and the state collaborating to impose certain aesthetic or political views on the people. The case of Richard Serra's *Titled Arc*, 1981, created for the Federal Plaza in New York, resulted in a failed effort to impose an artist's aesthetic statement in conflict with aesthetic interests of the community. After a lengthy court battle, the twelve-foot steel wall was removed in 1989. The artist's argument that his site-specific sculpture was a critical work in his career, and that it gave shape to the featureless

¹⁴ Barbara Hoffman, "Law for Art's Sake in the Public Realm," in Mitchell, ed., *Art and the Public Sphere*, 115.

¹⁵ Paul Feyerabend, "Science as Art," 1984.

space of the plaza did not prevail over citizens' objections to its intrusiveness. Ironically, despite its removal, the public debate surrounding the *Titled Arc* incident actually heightened public involvement in the process of creating public sculpture in significant ways. It initiated thoughtful and passionate dialogue involving artist, representatives of the government, the legal system, and the public and forced them to confront the problems of public sculpture including competing interests of the artist, the community, and the state.

John Ahearn's *Bronx Sculpture Park*, (1986-1991) suffered a similar fate. Commissioned by the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, Ahearn designed a park near a police station in his Bronx neighborhood. The park was envisioned as a positive bridge linking the police and the neighborhood. The park featured three free standing figurative bronze sculptures of actual people in the neighborhood: "a shirtless, overweight man held a basketball and leaned over a boom box, and a young man with a hooded sweatshirt knelt next to a fierce looking dog with a studded collar; a young woman wearing a Batman T shirt roller-skated between them."¹⁶ The response to Ahearn's public art work was a sense of outrage from the community with charges of racial stereotyping, glorifying drug dealers, and unambiguous out of work African Americans. In this instance, the artist accepted responsibility, acknowledging an error in judgment and voluntarily dismantled the piece. Nevertheless, the piece generated considerable discussion on such issues as whether public art must always present a positive image and the artist's responsibility to the community who must live with the art.

One approach intended to address the need for community participation in public sculpture is Joseph Beuys' (1921-1986) social sculpture. A major shift in thinking about public sculpture was required when Beuys advanced his concept of social sculpture with *7000 Oaks* at Documenta in Kassel, Germany 1982-1987. The work began with "seven thousand large basalt stones arranged in a triangular pile pointing to a single oak tree."¹⁷ Beuys then called for individuals or organizations to purchase

¹⁶ Suzanne Lacy, ed., *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre in Public Art* (Bay Press, 1995), 195.

¹⁷ Michael North, "The Public as Sculpture: From Heavenly City to Mass Ornament," in Mitchell, ed., *Art and the Public Sphere*, 11.

the stones, replacing each stone with a person, to enable planting of 7000 trees in Kassel. This process resulted in extending the sculptural object into a process action, or perhaps in replacing the sculptural object by the audience, as North has suggested. The radical shift toward community involvement noted in Beuys and other late twentieth-century sculptors transfers the focus of public sculpture from the objects generated from the inner resources of the sculptor's mind to the audience's experience and actions. The audience through its experience and participation in effect becomes the sculpture.

The Audience's Role

Just as there are questions affecting the role and concept of the artist in public sculpture, there are also important issues concerning the audience for public sculpture. It is necessary to ask, for instance, who is the audience for public art? The answer is that there are many publics, hence many audiences. Who, for instance is the audience for the monuments on the Mall in Washington, D. C. Immediately, there are many possible answers: foreign visitors, tourists from across the nation, the Congress and other government officials, the military, the regular citizens of Washington, who immediately subdivide into political, ethnic, gender, and countless other interest such as war veterans. And the variations multiply as the field is extended to culturally rich urban landscapes across the nation and the world.

One outcome of recent developments in public sculpture has been a radical shift in the relationship of artists to audiences. Part of the problem is a disparity between contemporary sculpture practice and the public view of what sculpture should look like.¹⁸ Many members of the public still think of public sculpture in terms of heroic representations of the human figure deriving from the Greek and Roman models as represented in the monuments to Abraham Lincoln and Thomas Jefferson located on the Washington Mall. These sculptures are intended represent values and beliefs that the public can easily identify with.

¹⁸ Monroe Beardsley, *Aesthetics* (Harcourt Brace 1958, Hackett, 1981), 20, 21.

Yet, as traditional works such as these become inadequate to express increasingly pluralistic differences in social, political, and religious values, it is incumbent upon arts and the communities that they serve to find new approaches to public sculpture. This will not be an easy task, as agreement on artistic vocabularies through which to express these diversities may turn out to be as challenging as the task of sorting out the social and political differences themselves. . The modern practice of placing giant abstract sculptures in public places has often led to tensions in situations such as the controversy over Serra's "Tilted Arc" where the public is not prepared to accept the vocabulary of the artist.

There are nevertheless notably successful solutions such as the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Monument which opened in 1998 in Washington, D.C. By combining elements of the natural setting and contemporary representational sculpture with modern abstract forms to tell the story of Roosevelt's four terms, Lawrence Halprin evolves a vocabulary that speaks to the radical nature of the New Deal without alienating the public. The humanizing effects of incorporating the individual names of the dead in the Vietnam Memorial also transcends the limits of what might otherwise be simply abstract sculptural forms.

Another, perhaps bolder model is found in the sculpture of Joseph Beuys (1921-1986), mentioned above. Beuys' *7000 Oaks* project takes a further step toward redefining the relationship of artist and audience, by allowing the audience to participate actively in the process of creating his "social sculpture." He dethrones the notion of artist as one who creates *for* the audience and replaces this notion with a process where the artist creates *with* the audience in a common enterprise.

Experiments intended to address such questions are emerging in various cities across the United States. In the mid Nineties, Sculpture Chicago launched a series of public art experiments called "Culture in Action" in Chicago neighborhoods where artists could explore social and political concerns in the context of individual communities throughout the city. Sculpture Chicago is dedicated to engaging people who would not normally become involved in art, through its experiments in public art, and through fostering collaboration among community groups in the development of public art.¹⁹ The intent of this project is to establish

¹⁹ Eva M. Olson, Michael Berenson, Mary Jane Jacobs, *Culture in Action: A Public Art Program of Sculpture Chicago* (Bay Press, 1995), 10.

public sculpture that places equal emphasis on artist and audience, with the hope that art might become “a real part of people’s lives.”²⁰ This approach does not ignore the possibility that certain individuals might possess the special creativity necessary to the production of art, but it asks that the artists behave as citizens subject to the guidance of their fellow citizens, even inside the domain of their role as artist.

Arguably one might ask, is anything lost that is important to aesthetics in this shift from the romantic notion of the artist as individual creator to the role of artist who works interactively with the community? One result might be the need for public artists to surrender their allegiance with the *avant garde* approaches to art, which are often not immediately understood by the public. Here, it may be necessary to balance the need for innovative ideas against the value of public engagement. In the end, collaboration between artists and the public may reveal even greater possibilities for creative public projects, as some of the examples cited here would suggest.

Assessment of Public Art

Finally, the question of how we measure the success or failure of public art requires attention. Charles Griswold has found the appropriate words on which we may draw to begin: “It is necessary to understand the symbolism, social context, and the effects of the art work on those who experience it.”²¹ Assessing a public art work is much more complex than judging the worth of a painting or other self-contained work of fine art where the principal considerations are aesthetics and/or market value. Measuring the success or failure of public art requires addressing questions of ethics and the broader social implications of the work together with aesthetics. *Effectiveness*, which refers to the outcomes measurable in changes in attitude, feelings, beliefs, values or understanding, is a useful standard by which to judge the success of public art. In some instances, public art can be considered effective

²⁰ Olson, Berenson, Jacobs, *Culture in Action, A Public Art Program of Sculpture Chicago*, 10-14.

²¹ Charles L. Griswold, “The Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Washington Mall: Philosophical Thought on Political Biography,” *Critical Inquiry* 12: Summer, 1986.

when the viewers take action that is inspired or motivated directly or indirectly by experiencing the public art. But as Suzanne Lacy has noted, effectiveness lacks the methodological precision necessary to deliver exact measurements of the social and critical impact of public art in a complex and changing world. For example, is a project that involves a large population more effective than a project engaging a smaller number of committed individuals? Do the aims or the actions being championed matter? Or How do we assess public art that itself becomes the target of public opposition?²²

Open-endedness in public art often fulfills a role in a democratic society by encouraging new challenges to the mind and to societal processes. In doing so, public art signifies and also generates renewed vitality. Viewed in this light, public art can best be seen as “a process of meaning-making interactions” that enrich every day life by themselves remaining open to new and evolving interpretations.²³ It may be that success and failure become provisional judgments subject to change as circumstances change.²⁴ Hence, artists who participate in public art projects need to understand that their work will be judged by broader social criteria and may not turn out to be permanent. Some public art will undoubtedly be temporary experiments useful for a limited time.

Considering the assessment of public art from the perspective of its role as a measure of civilization, public art, even more than gross national product or the size of the armies, serves as an important indicator of achievement. It symbolizes a nation’s culture, as the pyramids and temples from ancient Egypt and Greece, as well as the skyscrapers of Chicago and New York attest. Both then and now public art is a function of a complex network of artists working in a context of political action, economic development, and other interests. Perhaps the most effective public art incorporates universal concerns that speak beyond the boundaries of a particular community or nation and attract the attention of visitors on a world scale as well as the interests of a particular community. Is this not why travelers yearn to

²² Suzanne Lacy, “Debated Territory,” in *Mapping the Terrain* (Bay Press, 1995), 182, 183.

²³ Alan Kaprow, “Successes and Failures When Art Changes,” in Lacy, ed. *Mapping the Terrain*, 158.

²⁴ Kaprow, “Success and Failure When Art Changes,” 157.

visit the great public art works past and present wherever they may be?

Concluding Remarks

Public art, perhaps even more than gross national product or the size of the armies, is an important measure of the power and influence of a nation. It is a key element in the spread of influence of a nation's culture, as the pyramids and temples from ancient Egypt and Greece as well as the skyscrapers of Chicago and New York attest. Both then and now public art is a function of a complex network of artists working in a context of political action, economic development, and other value interests. Perhaps the most effective public art incorporates universal concerns that speak beyond the boundaries of a particular community or nation and attract the attention of visitors on a world scale as well as the interests of a particular community. Is this not why travelers yearn to visit the great public art works past and present wherever they may be?

What then, when taking account of developments in public art, has become of our initial definition of sculpture as the art of representing observed or imagined objects in solid material and in three dimensions? It would appear that the definition remains useful for traditional sculpture through most of history. However, it is necessary to modify the definition to include recent modern and contemporary developments in public art. For instance, at first glance, it would appear that social sculpture is not a form of representational art as it has been understood traditionally. Social sculpture does not resemble or copy, but it can refer to ideas in a broad sense. However, the main focus has shifted from sculptures made from solid materials to social and political actions. Social sculpture now embraces actions in social space as well as physical space, which are not necessarily three dimensional in the physical sense. The temporal dimension is of particular significance in public art, as it can involve history as well as thought and actions in real time.

Even more have the traditional boundaries of public sculpture been extended as, artists continue to create many variations including light

sculptures, earth art sculptures, installations, video, internet, and now cyber-art message boards. With the emergence of the internet and cyberspace, it is necessary to broaden our thinking again about the different form in which public art might appear. Today, public art also includes transient performance art as well as “action” works intended to convey a social message. A particularly challenging example would be, “Media Burn,” a 1975 performance art work of the Collaborative Art and Architecture group. Performed at San Francisco’s Cow Palace, *Ant Farm* represents a public art performance intended as a critique of the mass media’s control of information. In response to a speech, an artist portraying President John Kennedy, asked the assembled spectators, “Haven’t you ever wanted to put your foot through your television screen? Amid roars from the crowd, and the playing of the “Star Spangled Banner,” two brave artist-astronauts rammed a customized 1959 Cadillac Biarritz at fifty-five miles per hour through a wall of fifty burning television sets.... The impact...hurled flame and smoke-filled television sets into the air. The crowd roared as burning television sets continued to implode.” Ironically, the event was dutifully reported on the local television stations as the lead news event of the day.²⁵

Philosophers may wish to ponder the implications of these changes for the future of public art. Similarly they may wish to reflect on the implications of the transformations occurring with respect to public art, for aesthetics. One might ask, for instance, what changes in aesthetics are required to accommodate the reconstructing of art to include public sculpture in the form of social practices and technological innovations such as those sited previously here. Possibly none, because certain artistic practices such as music, drama theater, and dance have always entailed collaborative efforts and technological innovation. In any event, there is much to gain for the public good by extending the benefits of enlivened joint participation of artists and the community in exploring new frontiers of public art. There is always the risk that innovative ventures may become stifled by unenlightened community forces who might render it impossible to produce significant public works. The antidote to this situation must be to educate the community through its participation in the art-making process.

²⁵ Suzanne Lacy, ed., *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre in Public Art* (Bay Press, 1995), 199.