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Sculpture as a Public Art

Curtis L. Carter

Marquette University, curtis.carter@marquette.edu

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Sculpture As a Public Art

Sculpture occupies prominent spaces in virtually every community throughout the world and serves important cultural roles with respect to art, religion, politics, and community life. The practice of sculpture invites consideration of problems of philosophical interest in the social contexts where sculpture interacts with life. Here I will focus on sculpture as public art where the discussion is often lively. Historically, sculpture has been characterized as “the art of representing observed or imagined objects in solid materials and in three dimensions” (*Encyclopedia Britannica 1958*: Vol. 20, 198). The term ‘representation’ in this context, as distinct from literal mechanical reproduction, refers to the interpretive recreation in a medium such as stone of the natural appearance or ideal features of object, or of ideas in the mind corresponding to the same. This notion of sculpture serves as a point from which subsequent modifications evolve. 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. One important testimony to the power of sculpture is its use, or prohibition in various religions. In certain animistic religions, sculpture has a central role in religious practices. Yet the major monotheistic religions including Judaism, Islam, and some parts of Christianity banned the making of sculptures based on the human body or other living creatures as idolatry to discourage the

worship of images.

By way of moving to public sculpture, I advance the notion that one of sculpture’s most important characteristics is its public nature. It is not necessary to argue in support of this point that all sculpture is public, as there are at least some clear cut instance such as personal portraits that qualify as belonging to the private sphere. However, it may well be true that, more so than in other art forms, with the exception of architecture, sculpture exists primarily as a type of public art in the public sphere. In some respects, the problems of architecture and sculpture are similar. Their common task is to physically and psychologically organize, fill, and give identity to space. Both provide environments in which one moves. Sculpture, however, differs from architecture in its public functions, as it need not provide shelter or compartmentalize space for diverse functional needs as does architecture. Unlike music, poetry, theater, or painting, where the listener has a choice to turn off the source, public sculpture typically persists in a fixed and determined space that does not permit its audience a choice of whether or not to experience it when visiting a space in which it occurs. For instance, when attached to the architecture of public buildings, or located in major plazas or parks, sculpture is accessible to all people using the environment. Typically, public sculpture exists outside the protection of the institutional museum setting. It is thus not subject to the limitation of access that

museum security and public hours impose on art, nor to the curatorial conventions of presentation and interpretation. The importance of this added accessibility should not be overlooked.

Public sculpture suggests the concept of public space, which in turn implies also a public sphere. All of these notions are in need of clarification. At the present time there is no consensus about what public sculpture should look like, or what forms it should take. Public sculpture has existed as landmark, monument, architectural embellishment, symbol, and independent aesthetic object. There are of course the additional borderline cases such as "Inserts" by Group Material, a twelve page, ten-artwork supplement stuffed into the May 22 1988 Sunday New York Times Magazine bought in Manhattan from 23rd Street south and in certain neighborhoods in Brooklyn which further complicate the notion of public sculpture. "Inserts" was funded by the Public Art Fund and it existed for a site specific segment of the public. There is also the possibility that, in the future, internet websites might also qualify as candidates for virtual public sculpture.

Thus it is important to recognize that the term public sculpture embraces a broad scope of activity not easily subsumable under a common practice set of issues.

One problem with the terms 'public' and 'public sphere' is that they are terms with a history of considerable fluidity and diversity in meanings, depending on political and local settings. For instance, the public sphere in a monarchy might refer to property ownership and control of 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 vari-

ously 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 the influences of the media, interest groups, political parties, government bureaucracies, and the legal system, all of which help define the public sphere. Variances of this sort suggest differing and perhaps competing interests in the public sphere that could lead to very different requirements for public sculpture. One only had 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 to appreciate this point. From the list of various interests that might comprise or influence the public sphere, it can be anticipated that public art from time to time will be called upon to serve various audiences within the public sphere.

Given these complexities, how might a philosopher begin to address the issues of public sculpture? The first task might be to investigate the distinction between public and private spheres as this distinction applies to sculpture. 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. 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 the United States Congress or an agency of the government to commission a sculpture to honor the soldiers lost in the Vietnam War would result in a case of public sculpture.

The next consideration is to look at the particular role of the artist in public sculpture. First, the sculptor who is charged with making a public sculpture is acting 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 sculpture 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 as a means of social control 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 designed by Maya Lin 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 initial public outcry, the Vietnam Memorial has become an embracing symbol of "national mourning and reconciliation" as well as a "critical parody," reversing the usual role of war monuments (Mitchell 1992: 3). 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.

As the contemporary mood has changed, there is increasing interest in the critical function of public sculpture. In its critical function, public sculpture is 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 work 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 no consensus (Causey 1998: 219).

Such incidents raise broader questions concerning the sculptor's role in creating public sculpture. In effect, the artist who chooses to participate in creating public sculpture is in a unique and problematic role. The romantic view of the artist as an individual creator endowed with special gifts for making art 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. To assume this traditional role with its claim to special insights and privileges without taking into account guidance and participation of the community will surely lead to difficulties. 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 sculpture is placed. Should the artist then simply absorb and represent the views of the community through non-controversial images? Or is the sculptor to assume the role of social critic and proceed according to insights deriving from inner vision? Expecting the sculptor to become a spokesperson for the community, or a social critic, on significant and sensitive aesthetic, political, and social issues has become increasingly problematic in cul-

turally 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 artists' perspective there is the risk of becoming merely an instrument of propaganda for the state or one of the many interest groups comprising the community, which may well compromise the integrity of their private lives.

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. (Hoffman, 1991, "Law For Art's Sake in the Public Realm," in Mitchell, 115)

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? 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. (Feyerabend, 1987, p. 711.) 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

rives 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 sculpture suggests a need for directing the processes guiding public sculpture toward greater community participation. It suggests that public sculpture is not about artists working in isolation to make beautiful sculpture 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 the site specific sculpture was a critical work in his career and that it gave shape to the featureless 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.

One approach intended to address the need for community participation in public sculpture is Joseph Beuys' social

sculpture (Michaud 1988: 41, 44). 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 in 1982. The work began with "seven thousand large basalt stones arranged in a triangular pile pointing to a single oak tree." (North 1992: 11) Beuys then called for individuals or organizations to purchase 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.

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 sculpture? 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. (Beardsley, 1981, 9) 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.

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 transcend the limits of what might otherwise be simply abstract sculptural forms.

Another, perhaps bolder model is found in the sculpture of Joseph Beuys.

Beuys' "7000 Oaks" project takes a further step toward redefining the relationship of artist and audience relationship, 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 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. (Olson 1995: 10-14) The intent of this project was to establish public sculpture that placed equal emphasis on artist and audience, with the hope that art might become "a real part of people's lives" (Olson 1995: 14), especially for people who would not normally become involved. 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 to the artist who works interactively with the community. One result might be the need for the artists to modify their allegiance with the avant garde that has consistently generated new forms of art that are not immediately understood by the public. But there is much to be gained by extending the sphere of art to people who might not otherwise participate.

Finally, there is one more question that might interest philosophers today, that is, what is the relation of public

sculpture to mass art? Initially it has some features of mass art as defined by Noel Carroll: it is produced for, and consumed by, many people and brings aesthetic experience to a mass audience; it is class indifferent; is readily accessible with minimum effort to large numbers of people. Moreover, public sculpture, in its most successful forms at least, shares with mass art a distrust of avant garde. Historically it would appear that public sculpture encounters problems with its audience when it veers toward the avant garde. This would depend on the context and may not be so in every case as the Beuys work would indicate. Public sculpture nevertheless differs from other types of mass art such as movies, television, and rock & roll music which exist as multiple instances deriving from industrial mass society technologies of production and distribution (Carroll 1998: 185-211). Our conclusion is that public sculpture shares with mass art important features as noted. But it fails to satisfy Carroll's requirement of being a multiple instance or type artwork produced and distributed by a mass technology. That is, unless we decide to include the virtual public sculptures of the internet website or some future variation of that form.

What then, when taking account of developments in public sculpture, 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, is there a sense in which social sculpture can be representational? It does not resemble or copy, but it can refer to ideas in a broad sense. Social sculpture does not preclude the use of solid materials, but the main focus has shifted

from these materials to social and political actions. To the extent that social action is three dimensional, this feature still applies to contemporary practices in sculpture, but three dimensional art now embraces actions in social space as well as physical space. The temporal dimension is of particular significance in public sculpture, as it can involve history as well as thought and actions in real time. Philosophers may wish to ponder the implications of these changes for the ontology of sculpture. They will also need to examine in greater depth the issues in the differentiation of the public and private spheres, as well as other changes emerging in the current practice and experience of sculpture. Similarly they may wish to ponder the implications of public sculpture as a community process on traditional concerns in aesthetics. One might ask, for instance, whether anything is lost that is important to the field of aesthetics in making the shift in the notions of art as a social practice instead of an individual practice in the romantic sense. Possibly not, because certain artistic practices have always entailed collaborative efforts. And there is much to gain for the public good by extending the benefits of participating in art to a larger population. The worst cases that I can foresee are that sculptors who participate in public art may be forced to give up their alliances with the *avant garde*, or that they become stifled by unenlightened community forces who render it impossible to produce significant works. The antidote to this situation would be to educate the community through its participation in the art-making process. Charles Griswold has found the appropriate words on which we may draw to end this exploration: "To reflect philosophically on matters of public art...It is necessary to understand the symbolism, social context, and the effects of the art work on those who experience it." (Charles Griswold, 1986, Critical In-

quiry 12 (Summer, 1986). In Mitchell: Art and the Public Sphere 1992: 81.)

Curtis L. CARTER
American Society for Aesthetics/
Marquette University
Haggerty Museum of Art, P.o.Box 1881
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53201-1881
U.S.A.

INTERNET: curtis.carter@marquette.edu