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**OVER THE RIVER**

**F. Public Art Documents**

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*The following article by Jack Becker appeared on the Community Arts Network website.*

## **Public Art's Cultural Evolution**

Public art is something that was easily defined as recently as the 1960s—what I refer to as the four M's: Murals, Monuments, Memorials and Mimes. Today it's almost anything and everything artists can think up, a broad spectrum of activities encompassing almost every aspect of our lives.

Growth in the field over the last 30 years is impressive by any standard. In addition to corporate, liturgical and individually supported efforts, federally funded public art continues to increase. The proliferation of percent-for-art programs in the U.S. that began in Philadelphia in 1959 now includes 30 states, 300 cities and dozens of counties. Most of these use a simple commissioning or purchasing system, following the European tradition of patronage. The NEA's Art in Public Places program emerged in the mid-'70s, and immediately—but not surprisingly—became embroiled in controversy.

Seminal works are plentiful: Alexander Calder's mobiles or Isamo Noguchi's sculptural work in the '50s; Eero Saarinen's "Gateway Arch" for St. Louis and Alan Kaprow's "Happenings" in the '60s; and Christo's "Running Fence" and Robert Smithson's "Spiral Jetty" in the '70s. In the '80s, two projects had a profound impact on the field: Maya Lin's "Vietnam Veterans Memorial" in Washington, D.C., and Richard Serra's "Tilted Arc" in New York City. An unknown graduate student at Yale, Lin was selected from 1,200 entries for the memorial, and though her struggle to complete the project was monumental, it stands today as a groundbreaking masterpiece. Serra, on the other hand, was an internationally renowned artist whose works are in most major museum collections. His 112-foot curved steel arc on the Federal Plaza, however, was not well received by the users of the site, and was removed eight years later at great expense. Lin's project liberated memorials from the monolith or personage and demonstrated powerful and expressive placemaking. In contrast, the removal of Serra's sculpture proved that the public is the final arbiter of public space; if enough people want a work of publicly funded art removed, the artist—no matter how revered—must comply.

Innovative collaborations and independent initiatives in the '70s and '80s paved the way for a large number and diverse array of artists to move out of the studio and into a much larger arena with expanded options for delivering their creative expressions (not to mention the opportunity to directly connect with audiences on their own turf). From the '90s through today, the public-art field encompasses placemaking, environmental activism, cause-related art, interdisciplinary performance events, a wide variety of community-based initiatives, and much more. Pioneers include Suzanne Lacy, Mel Chin, Judy Baca, Siah Armajani and many more.

Many artists—like myself—were introduced to the field as employees of President Carter's one-year Comprehensive Employment Training Act (CETA) jobs program in the late '70s, in which artists were put to work in the community on a grand scale similar to that of the WPA era of the '30s. My CETA job was Gallery Director at the Minneapolis Arts Commission, with a desk and phone at City Hall. The only catch was there was no gallery; I was charged with organizing displays of artists' work in publicly accessible locations throughout the city (such as the library, the Government Center, parks and plazas). With the whole city as a gallery, and 60 CETA artists engaged in the program, it is not surprising that this was a watershed year for the emerging community-arts movement in Minneapolis.

The evolution of public art took a quantum leaps in the early '70s with the notion of "site-specific" art: works designed for a particular place, taking into account the site's physical surroundings as well as other environmental or social factors. In addition to removing themselves from the isolation of their studios, artists began to get acquainted with the world around them. They began considering alternative venues for expression, and they began considering the context for their work. Why not incorporate the wind, the arc of the sun, the change of the seasons? Why not consider audience demographics, the history of the site,

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current events or the many social forces that can shape a place? Work in the field resembled a living laboratory, with mixing and matching of ideas, talents, sites and audiences. There were no rules of the road; you could pretty much draw your own map or write your own job description.

I tend to divide artists like doctors: There are specialists and general practitioners. GPs are into process and working laterally across many disciplines. Specialists are typically product makers, focusing on one thing and doing it expertly (a trompe l'oeil muralist, for instance). Those engaged in producing different types of public art find it useful to know something about lighting, engineering, architecture, landscape design, conservation, and perhaps even urban planning or community development. In addition, public art as a business may require budgeting, insurance, copyright laws, digital design or model making, grant writing, public relations, fabrication and much more.

For the most part, public artists have to learn on their own through trial and error; educational institutions have only in the past few years begun to address the multifaceted aspects of public art and the skills needed to become “professionals” and compete in this field. The lack of educational opportunities and limited support for emerging public artists are perhaps the two greatest problems facing the growth and development of professionals in the field. If you’ve never done a sculpture commission, how are you going to get one? How do you get your foot in the door? The third greatest problem is the lack of critical writing and intelligent media coverage. Most public art is reduced to a photo op or a human-interest story in the metro section.

As a combination of the artist’s vision and the community’s values, public art should resonate in some way. It is as much about the dialogue that occurs among those engaged in a process as it is about any finished product. The process often resembles theater, in which individuals assume roles and responsibilities with a common goal in mind. Planning, negotiating and navigating bureaucracy is critical; indeed, bureaucracy is an art form—like found-object sculpture—in which people, places and things are all raw materials. While these complexities can confound and discourage newcomers, public art efforts offer many rewards and give meaning to art that reaches the hearts and minds of people where they live, work or play.

Communities desiring meaningful public art need to work at it, and reach out and participate in making successful projects. After all, the public is the final beneficiary of good public art. As the demographics and economies in our communities change, so too will public art; artists from diverse backgrounds, cultures and disciplines are participating in increasing numbers, including a growing number of women and minorities. As audiences mature and diversify, the question of what makes good public art and who decides what is good becomes increasingly important.

For the field to evolve beyond the traditional commissioned artwork, ask artists what *they* want to do to in public and how they wish to develop their public-art careers. More experimentation between and among artists and audiences will yield more effective means of delivering creative expressions or social messages with greater emotional impact and cost effectiveness. There should be more support for temporary and experimental projects that provide valuable stepping stones for artists and learning opportunities for audiences. Support more demonstration projects and research-and-development efforts by emerging artists of all disciplines. Encourage artists to work outside the studio in their own communities and forge partnerships with groups engaged in issues of concern to them. Witness the impact of the NAMES Project AIDS Quilt or the value of performance art to the cause of Greenpeace.

If “the customer’s always right” and “everyone’s a critic,” then public art must continue to prove its value to the public. It is this value which for so long has remained elusive or unrecognized. As public art infiltrates almost every facet of our culture and the physical world—in myriad forms—it can help all the arts to regain a position of value and priority in our society.

We are all the audience for public art. Audience development is critical. We need artists to help us memorialize, to beautify, to address problems, to serve communities, to manifest ideas. We need artists—without the filtering systems of museums, galleries or theaters — to alert us to real-world issues, investigate phenomena, to make us smile, help us remember, let us mourn, engage our young, teach us lessons. We need public artists to give shape to our shared identity, and bring their individual, creative perspectives to the world.

### Postscript

No scientific research has been done regarding the impact of public art on our daily lives or the national economy. Until such time, feel free to use my “faux statistics” to impress political leaders, funders or policy makers:

- An average of 55 million viewers experience public art firsthand every day, approximately 1,000 times the audience experiencing art galleries, museums and theaters combined. The Vietnam Memorial alone is visited by more than 10,000 people daily, and artworks in airports or subways are seen daily by over five million travelers.
- Public art receives ten times the media attention other art forms receive.
- An average public art project provides 50 times the economic impact of arts events in traditional venues, yet the cost to the public for public art is less than 50 cents per taxpayer per year, based on the amount of public funding used to fund public art. In two cases—Christo’s “Wrapped Reichstag” for Berlin, which generated more than \$300 million in three weeks for that city, and Chicago’s “Cows on Parade,” which generated more than \$200 million for that city—no taxpayer’s dollars were used.
- Compared to theaters and museums, public art has relatively low overhead, low staffing costs and produces less waste or environmental damage.
- Most public art is not publicly funded. Churches, schools, hospitals, corporations, individuals and private nonprofits support most of the art we see in the public realm.
- More money is spent cleaning up unwanted graffiti than is spent on all the public art in most major American cities.

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### Reference

Becker, Jack. 2002. “Public Art’s Cultural Evolution.” Community Arts Network.  
[http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archivefiles/2002/02/public\\_arts\\_cul.php](http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archivefiles/2002/02/public_arts_cul.php). Accessed March 1, 2007.

## Appendix F

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To Whom It May Concern

From: Dianne Perry Vanderlip

The Polly and Mark Addison Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art  
The Denver Art Museum

This report attempts to present some ideas and observations about the significance of the placement of art in general and some ways of thinking about the significance and impact of art that is temporarily placed in a public space that is not traditionally used for the display of art.

Think of a pyramid. At the top of the pyramid is the individual collector. When an individual acquires a work of art, many issues are in play. First, the collector is implying by his/her purchase that "This is who I am. This is what I personally believe in. This work of art represents my point of view and maybe even my value system." Presumably, the work will be on view in their home and friends and family are invited in to enjoy it. Perhaps it remains the only work the collector owns, or maybe it becomes part of a larger collection. Regardless, the public's involvement with the work(s) of art is not an issue.

The middle of the pyramid represents works that are acquired by museums whose mission it is to collect, care for and exhibit works of art that the curators believe have important distinguishing characteristics and historical significance. The presumption is that over the years certain segments of the public, including but not limited to the individual collector, will want to come to the museum to see these works. Whether or not they personally "like" what they see is almost beside the point. The works are there to be cared for, exhibited in an appropriate, often traditional context, and appreciated over and over again with repeat visits. Over the course of a lifetime, a visitor can come back to a museum again and again, each time finding something familiar and rewarding about the works of art. The flow of viewers is often slow, as there are no real time constraints...the works will be there forever.

The exception to this is when a museum presents their collections in a temporary exhibition that is only up for a limited time. These exhibitions often present old favorites in new contexts, and there is often a much larger audience for the "temporary" exhibitions than there is for the display of the permanent collections. The public knows that if they want to experience, for example "The Splendors of King Tut's Tomb", they better get to the exhibition while it's up, as it will be the only chance to see such a display in their lifetime. Many of the people who attend these 'blockbuster' exhibitions are not art connoisseurs or even art lovers. They come from all over the country and pay handsomely for the ticket to get in simply to participate in a rare cultural event. They

leave knowing they have experienced something unique that they will be able to discuss and share for the rest of their lives.

The bottom of the pyramid represents works of art that are temporarily placed in a public space for all to experience, free of charge. The people who want to see these works certainly include both of the previously mentioned examples, but are widely expanded to include people who might not usually care to look at art, those who might prefer going to a rally, or a parade or pageant, or watch fireworks. There are hundreds of thousands of these people that form the base of the pyramid. They know the event...the fireworks or parade... has a limited duration and they want to experience it. Their lives are slightly changed by the knowledge that they have experienced and shared a unique and fleeting event with friends and strangers alike from all walks of life. These are often the people who derive special pleasure from experiencing a project by Christo and Jeanne-Claude.

There are few events in the world that bring people from all walks of life together in such a positive way as does the art of Christo and Jeanne-Claude. Their determination to make their artworks stupendously huge, visually stunning, important public events is legendary and historic and given the opportunity, people want to see one of their projects in person. Such is the power of their temporary public art projects.

I had the personal opportunity of experiencing two of their projects, most recently *The Gates* in New York City's Central Park, and before that the *Wrapped Reichstag* in Berlin, Germany and each of the events have profoundly affected me. The absolute joy shared by the millions of people experiencing each of those projects set all the woes of the world aside...for just those few days that we were all able to instead consider the immense gift these artists had given us. They gave the gift of a totally new experience that cost us nothing, but gave us a shared sense of humanity and respect for the achievements of the individual. Those projects made a difference in the life of all who experienced them.

The residual difference, the ongoing history of those moments made available by the photographs and posters that have documented the event, let them exist in history forever. Anyone who visited Central Park during *The Gates* will never think of it in quite the same way. The horrific image of Hitler's setting the Reichstag on fire has been replaced by the joyful memory of the Christo and Jeanne-Claude's bright silver – wrapped, blue ribbon festooned gift of the *Wrapped Reichstag* to the new united German Republic. Art makes a difference.

I was not able to see the *Rifle Gap* project in Colorado in person. However, experiencing it through hearsay and photographs profoundly influenced my decision to move to Colorado from Philadelphia nearly thirty years ago. I believed that a state that had so much respect for the freedom and dreams of artists and whose citizens wanted to share in that freedom and dream by helping the artists fulfill such a gigantic ambition was a place I wanted to live.

I believe the *Over the River* project they hope to do in Colorado will be every bit as successful as their other projects. Part of the success will be due to the extreme care

Christo and Jeanne Claude always take to protect the environment and enlist the aid of the citizens, lay and expert alike, before they move forward. Their ideas have so often become reality because of their unparalleled ability to work within existing systems all the while engaging the best of the community's imagination and spirit.

Their painstaking process takes years to complete, and during those years anticipation for the project mounts, and mounts. And as it mounts, all the positive qualities of the State of Colorado will become known throughout the world and we will all share the anticipation of what will be. This will not just be a local art event. This will not be an elitist event. This will be a world class experience that will live in the memories of hundreds and thousands of people forever.

For those of us lucky enough to live here, I think we will be seeing our own Colorado city folks, who would never take a drive along that stretch of the Arkansas, visiting the project and developing a whole new awareness and appreciation for their own backyard. And, as with all of Christo and Jeanne-Claude's projects, people from around the world will come to see this once in a lifetime event. They will go back to their native countries singing the praises of the beauty of Colorado's public lands and the hospitality of the citizens of our state.



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November 12, 2006

To Whom It May Concern:

This letter is intended for inclusion in the proposal for *Over The River, Project for the Arkansas River*, a temporary work of public art proposed by Christo and Jeanne-Claude, and it will consider the possible harm or benefit of the project to the public spirit. Though difficult to quantify, these are not simply subjective matters. We can examine the inextricably intertwined aesthetic, educational and moral dimensions of the proposal in a rigorous way. To do so we will need to ask: What criteria we apply to determine the merit of the work of public art? Does the work serve the public good? Can it do harm? What is the purpose of a work of art in relation to agreed upon principles of what constitutes the public good.

Writing in 1778, Thomas Jefferson argued that "even under the best forms [of government], those entrusted with power have, in time, and by slow operations, perverted it into tyranny; and it is believed that the most effectual means of preventing this would be to illuminate, as far as practicable, the minds of the people at large."<sup>1</sup> To achieve this "illumination" he proposed "...to begin a public library and gallery, by laying out a certain sum annually in books, paintings, and statues."<sup>2</sup> Thus from the founding of the country, the framers of the United States Constitution understood art to be part of the moral and analytical education necessary to the public in the preservation of democracy. This gives art an important place in the American democracy. In Jefferson's view, a good work of art is therefore one that engenders constructive debate. But few of us have stopped to examine rigorously in what way the art we place in public fulfills this role; work that is too bland to provoke controversy and discussion would clearly not satisfy this Jeffersonian ambition.

In Jefferson's designs for the University of Virginia, he painstakingly took even the smallest ornamental details from the buildings of republican Rome as part of a didactic program for the students and faculty. Republican Rome embodied democratic values that he sought to inculcate in the citizens of the new American republic. Jefferson

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Jefferson, "A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge," 1778, Library of America, 365.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Jefferson "Notes on the State of Virginia," 1787, Library of America 274-5.

intended visitors to his University to see the way in which each building could simultaneously be unique in its architectural orders and at the same time fit harmoniously into an overall scheme, just as he hoped the participants in our democracy could form consensus through an exchange of differing views among unique individuals. So, in the University of Virginia, Jefferson provided a symbolism of democratic virtues in his design. In the depth with which he considered every detail of the plan and its relation to the whole, he also provided a model of thinking deeply about the meaning of forms.

For Jefferson, the safeguards of a free society are freedom of the press and a citizenry educated to judge the information revealed by that free press. Works of art that merely “look nice” are worthless, from this point of view. Art should challenge members of the public to think, exercising their minds and enhancing their ability to examine issues – in art and in society.

*Over the River*, the proposed work by Christo and Jeanne-Claude, will inevitably cause a healthy controversy and debate about its merit as a work of art; many will argue that it isn't a work of art at all while others will be outraged that the nay-sayers are so narrow minded! The passion engendered by this discussion will, as in all previous projects by Christo and Jeanne-Claude, create a critical atmosphere that causes citizens to examine many aspects of public process with fresh eyes. Precisely because the project will be so out of the ordinary in the context, people will depart from their routine habits of thinking all around the site. This in turn will cause them to take notice of how a wide range of things function: traffic control, judicial review of the permitting process, issues of access and financing in public lands, and so on. This degree of public scrutiny will, as it has in all past projects by these artists, lead to significant enhancements of the public domain: the economic rebirth of South Beach (in Miami) and the development of an environmental council for South Florida (an effective coalition of the major environmental conservation agencies in the region) were both stimulated by the 1983 *Surrounded Islands* project of Christo and Jeanne-Claude; their 2005 project, *The Gates, Central Park, New York City*, contributed significantly to the spiritual and economic recovery of New York after 9/11.

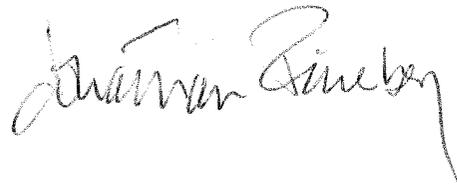
Promoting free expression in the arts and educating people to think deeply about them is part of fostering a broader ability in the citizenry to think and to express their insights. These are basic values on which our democratic institutions rely. If we believe that a better world will emerge from the free expression of ideas and a public coming together out of this free congress of perspectives – “e pluribus unum” as it says on our coins – then we need to support the use of public space as a forum for this debate.

No artist in American history has more effectively brought about this kind of constructive debate through art than the Christo and Jeanne-Claude. *Over The River* is certainly going to be passionately argued on all sides. Based on the historical performance of all previous projects by these artists, it will just as certainly follow with the same public success as such earlier Christo and Jeanne-Claude projects as

*Running Fence, Sonoma and Marin Counties, California 1972-76; Surrounded Islands, Biscayne Bay, Greater Miami, Florida, 1980-83; The Umbrellas, Japan-USA 1984-91; and The Gates, Central Park, New York City, 1979-2005.*

In addition to the successful promotion of democratic discourse, such works also provide great pleasure and an inspirational model of what is best in humankind. When we think of the great civilizations in history – Egypt, ancient Athens or Rome, the Italian Renaissance, even the Middle Ages – we think first of the great works of art they produced (the pyramids and the Sphinx, the Elgin Marbles, Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, and the great French cathedrals). The public has always so loved and revered great public art that they come to stand for our highest aspirations. It is highly significant to note in this context that those who have once witnessed a project by Christo and Jeanne-Claude become devoted admirers who return to subsequent projects; this has been amply documented in the press. It is difficult to explain for each individual the reasons this is so, but the press coverage of the audiences for these works repeatedly suggests that people identify with the freedom of expression and find an uplifting experience of aesthetic pleasure in the public projects of Christo and Jeanne-Claude. The fact that the artists take no funding from sponsors of any kind and hence create with a truly unencumbered freedom on a huge scale is inspiring to many people and it helps them celebrate that most fundamental American sense of independence and freedom that we all cherish.

Finally, there have been – without exception – substantial, quantifiable gains spiritually and practically to all previous projects by Christo and Jeanne-Claude and no evidence of lasting damage, spiritual or otherwise. It is hard to think of a better way to bring public attention to the needs of our geological patrimony, to lift our aspirations as a people, or to enhance the strengths of the American character and mind that caused Henry Luce to famously describe the 20<sup>th</sup> century as “The American Century.” It was our openness to new ideas and our ability to think creatively that gave us the Protean power that Luce found essential to the American character and that is what this work by Christo and Jeanne-Claude will express.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Jonathan Fairley". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned below the main body of text.

