

Public art for the public

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Abstract (Summary)

There used to be two federal programs dedicated to funding **public art**. Now there is one. The story of how one program adapted while the other disappeared is instructive for anyone concerned with how government can and should support artists. The key to understanding the divergence between the two programs lies in a concept that seems so intuitive once stated that it is almost surprising that it encounters so much resistance in the art world - the distinction between "**public art**" and "gallery art." People will tolerate, and perhaps even embrace, artworks in a gallery setting that would irk them if displayed in a public space. Unlike gallery art, **public art** must not be mindful merely of artistic concerns, but must also be attentive to the contextual aspect of its siting - it is created not to stand on its own, but to augment a larger public space. It is as much a question of public utility, associational significance, and expectations as it is a matter of the quality of particular pieces of art: Works that may gain critical renown in a gallery or sculpture park might be ridiculed in public.

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(7141 words)

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THERE used to be two federal programs dedicated to funding public art. Now there is one. This isn't an accident-a bureaucratic trick of fate or yet another example of congressional budgetary perfidy. It is easy to imagine circumstances in which we would still have both, or in which both would have vanished. In fact, for a long time both programs were on the same road to self-destruction: funding projects that many members of the general public found incomprehensible at best and offensive at worst. The story of how one program adapted while the other disappeared is instructive for anyone concerned with how government can and should support artists.

The key to understanding the divergence between the two programs lies in a concept that seems so intuitive once stated that it is almost surprising that it encounters so much resistance in the art world-the distinction between "public art" and "gallery art." People will tolerate, and perhaps even embrace, artworks in a gallery setting that would irk them if displayed in a public space. Unlike gallery art, public art must not be mindful merely of artistic concerns, but must also be attentive to the contextual aspect of its siting-it is created not to stand on its own, but to augment a larger public space. It is as much a question of public utility, associational significance, and expectations as it is a matter of the quality of particular pieces of art: Works that may gain critical renown in a gallery or sculpture park might be ridiculed in public.

The National Endowment for the Arts' Art in Public Places Program (APP) collapsed because it remained stubbornly out of touch with this reality. The General Services Administration's Art in Architecture Program (AiA), on the other hand, has thrived under a new model that recognizes the difference between gallery art and public art, and that takes account of the sensibilities of the people who will have to see the artwork every day. The GSA and NEA learned this lesson the hard way, through trial and error. But the two programs responded to their hurdles in very different ways. The GSA drew on the evolving wisdom of the field of public art, opening itself to local community input at its building sites and to the development of art forms that lend themselves to increased integration of artistic and architectural elements. However, the NEA's APP, assaulted by the twin knives of congressional budget cuts and public scrutiny, did not learn from its mistakes and was not robust enough to survive challenges to its institutional core of curators, artists, and museum directors.

"Our tax money paid for that!"

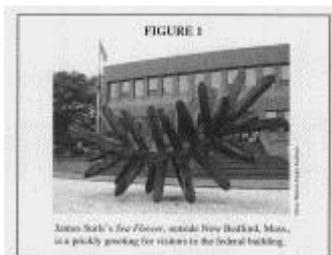
Public art, unlike gallery art, must be made for the public-the public is, of necessity, its audience. One can choose not to go to a gallery, but there are only a finite number of doors to a courthouse, and citizens are affected when art is commissioned for a plaza in front of the primary entrance-they will have to look at it whether it offends them or not. And they arguably have a right to critique anything that impedes their progress across that space or that annoys them on their way.

This discussion is difficult to approach, even by arts professionals, because it is easy to interpret it as outright criticism of artists' work, even when that is not the intent. The curatorial class tends to view as troglodytes those who express negative judgments about art. Sometimes this attitude insulates artists from attacks that are merely ignorant. But it also does a disservice, insulating art from productive discussion and further

marginalizing artists by cutting off any dialogue with the lay public. All citizens, including artists, have a right to free speech, but nobody deserves a free ride to use taxpayer money without any discussion. Ideological debates on artistic standards by partisan legislators may be biased and shortsighted. But even naïve criticism can carry a measure of truth. If a senator misunderstands a sculpture in a plaza, how is the average passerby supposed to make sense of it? And why should there be a great disconnect between the viewing public and an artist working in a public space?

Recognizing the public versus gallery divide does not necessarily amount to censorship of unappealing projects, but simply a more realistic assessment of a public art program's accountability. This attitude challenges the politically correct notion of art as a sacrosanct endeavor. But at the same time, one must recognize that public art is a special kind of art. Failure to appreciate this difference has often led the public to shine a negative spotlight on particularly offensive or ridiculous pieces of public art. One need look no further than the investigative reporting on local television news to see the populist discontent with gallery-type art in public spaces. This leads to the ever-looming question, "Is that where my tax money is going?" The end result of a public art failure can be quite serious. A public outcry comes to serve as a preemptive strike on the inclination of a community to commission public art. Unfortunately, this legacy often lasts long into the future.

A classic example comes courtesy of the pre-reform GSA program, in New Bedford, Massachusetts. In 1978, James Suris's *Sea Flower* installation was placed outside the new Hastings Keith Federal Building. The citizens were already put off by the aggressive architecture of the building itself, placed as it was at a diagonal to the city grid, interrupting the streetscape. Then the large-scale *Sea Flower* sculpture reared its pointy head in the plaza. The sculptor intended the anemone sculpture to be a riff on the sea theme of the New England fishing community. But residents were merely miffed and mystified by the hunk of wood and metal. As New Bedford's Marketing Director Arthur Motta put it in an interview:



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[Photograph]

FIGURE 1

James Suris's *Sea Flower*, outside New Bedford, Mass., is a prickly greeting for visitors to the federal building.

Picture telephone poles cut up into pieces eight feet in length and then rounded at one end and inserted in a spinal column that receives them like tubular steel. These things jutted out at all angles. The steel was rusted and then bled across the sidewalk over the course of years. Every now and then you'd have a report in the paper of a little old lady who banged her head on one of the projectiles and hurt herself.

Motta goes on to suggest that one shouldn't think of New Bedford as an art-intolerant place—it is a small city with many cultural landmarks and a rich history of monumental sculpture and art.

But at the time of *Sea Flower*'s installation a local newspaper survey found that 86 percent of respondents disliked the work. A berm was added later to help the blind and elderly avoid hurting themselves on the piece. In 1986, the mayor and city council endorsed a request to have GSA remove it. *Sea Flower* stayed firmly planted. In 1999, the artist agreed to having the piece moved to make room for a Korean War veterans memorial, but nothing came of that effort, either. The GSA restored the dilapidated sculpture in 2001.

Looking back, it is hard to sort out precisely what aspect of the work provoked the negative response. It could simply have been that most people thought it was ugly. Perhaps it was situated poorly in its environment. Or perhaps it was because the commissioning process had been so far removed from the citizens of New Bedford who would have to look at it day in, day out. Regardless, whether it was the appearance, the placement, or the fact that the federal government had imposed its aesthetic notions on the landscape, the GSA certainly left a mark with the people of New Bedford.

Looking past the Eiffel Tower

In a way, the *Sea Flower* debacle was decades in the making, with roots tracing back to the start of the modern era of government art support. Since 1963, the GSA has allocated at least one half of 1 percent of the construction budgets for new federal buildings and major renovations for public art. From the beginning, panels

of curators managed federal patronage of art. The curators' training and formal concerns usually favored abstraction, and often did not encourage works that would add identifiable meaning to their sites. The curators' tastes in art reflected the fashion of the time, with a predilection for what was perceived as avant garde.

Because of this initial bias, the history of the federal government's involvement with public art is marked by conflict. Government programs increasingly pitted curatorial preference—often gallery art imposed on a public setting—against a public wanting discernible meaning and relevance, increasingly skeptical of banal spaces and sculptural abstraction.

Sea Flower is typical of the GSA projects of the time. Arts commissioners, without local input, brought a well-recognized but non-local artist to do a decontextualized piece (often ugly) somewhere very public, with no explanatory materials or educational programming. This work, in turn, could not be removed without extreme controversy and hassle, no matter whether it turned out to be great or terrible. Part of the inertia that kept Sea Flower from washing away despite its unpopularity was the result of a wait-and-see mentality on the part of public arts administrators who controlled the purse strings. The theory was that cutting-edge art would be culturally uplifting and would put communities in line with cosmopolitan art trends. If one only waited for the initial outrage over public money being spent on something ugly and unapproachable to die down, lasting appreciation would follow. You could call it the Eiffel Tower Principle, after a piece of architecture that was much-derided in its day but eventually attained icon status. The only problem was that, unlike the Eiffel Tower's eventual popularity, public acceptance sometimes never came.

This divide between the cosmopolitan (and faintly elitist) gallery world and the public sphere came to a head in the mid 1990s, when a fed-up Congress started asking pointed questions about where the tax money was going, who was creating public art policy, and to whom these people were accountable.

Art meets everyday life

The NEA's APP is a perfect example of how not to juggle the sometimes competing interests of artists, the public, and funders of public art. The APP, which survived from 1967 to 1995, tenaciously clung to the values of the curatorial class even as Congress was tightening the noose around the NEA's neck. While this might have seemed at the time like a heroic stand in defense of artistic independence, ultimately it was merely self-defeating stubbornness.

The APP was created in 1967, two years after the birth of the NEA itself. Unlike the GSA's AiA, the Endowment didn't use the APP program to commission art. It merely offered grants to artists and arts organizations to create works of their own design, without giving specific guidelines for the art's creation as a commissioning agency would have. And unsurprisingly, given the artistic mores of the day, many of the APP's early public artworks were abstract sculpture. A good example is the program's famous first project, Alexander Calder's *La Grande Vitesse*, installed in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in 1969. The work was (and still is) situated on a windswept and barren plaza that is not user-friendly. That in itself was part of the problem at first, and continues to dog many APP projects. Their thoughtless placement and opaque design made them difficult for the public to approach in a meaningful way. Celebrated artists created many projects with artistic merit in their own right. But without interpretative cues, viewers often perceived them as part of the functional infrastructure, something to be ignored. In theory, the abstract pieces should have been universally approachable. In practice, however, they were not. It is true that the huge and colorful sculpture has now become the city's brand icon, emblazoned on garbage trucks and city letterhead. Yet, while this apparent acceptance has been mythologized by NEA advocates as a ringing popular endorsement, the experience of several visits to Grand Rapids suggests that *La Grande Vitesse* is still an isolated object on an elevated, windswept plaza that does not work as a civic totem.

A big part of the problem with the APP was the NEA itself; the APP was just one thread in a complex web of curatorial arrogance that eventually landed the entire Endowment in the congressional hot seat. The APP fell victim to a larger culture of unaccountability at the NEA that pitted romantic notions of the independent artist against the desire of taxpayers to obtain understandable (or at least inoffensive) art for their tax dollars. Consider the flap over Andres Serrano's infamous 1988 *PZSJ Christ*, a photograph of a crucifix suspended in the artist's urine. At heart, this dust-up resulted from the Endowment's hands-off policy toward the artworks it supported. It relied on a high level of competition among artists to ensure that grants went only to the highest-quality artists, whom the NEA trusted to produce great works without censorship or guidance from the commissioners. As Bert Kubli, a grants officer for the APP program from 1974 to 1995, put it in an interview, "If you believe in what individual artists can do, stand back and let them do it."

In retrospect, this policy appears sometimes naïve when it is applied to the particular needs of public art. Even worse, the NEA evinced no sign of comprehending the nature of the angst it was creating among some members of the public. The NEA eventually cut funding for individual artist grants, as a means of dodging

bullets in the culture wars. But this step was misguided, since the works that were ruffling so many feathers hadn't been funded through such grants in the first place. Serrano's controversial photograph appeared in a traveling, judged exhibition, and it was this exhibition-not the Serrano photo or any of the other works-that was partially funded by an NEA grant. The same is true of another source of controversy, a 1988 Robert Mapplethorpe traveling retrospective entitled Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment. This exhibition resulted in obscenity charges being filed against its hosts in Cincinnati and a lot of unfavorable attention for the NEA. But the Endowment had only funded it via an institutional grant to the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia. While on some level the difference between funding these artists and funding the institutions or exhibitions in which their works appeared might be of interest or import, it wasn't the issue to the critics of these works, and the NEA's pieties about protecting the rights of artists didn't assuage them.

The rights of artists to produce their art was never really the question. The real question was, What art should be supported with tax dollars? In the context of an important public debate on the role of publicly funded art, politicians and lobbyists launched attacks on the immoral and offensive character of contemporary art. Unfortunately, there is no litmus test to determine what art will not prove offensive to any constituency, and the NEA cannot effectively assess that. In a country where many and conflicting interests are represented, it is impossible not to step on toes, so perhaps it was inevitable that the NEA's programs would eventually come in for scrutiny. But because the Endowment's projects embodied the curatorial culture, they appeared foreign to much of the viewing public and to the elected officials deciding the program's fate. The disconnect between the public and its art left the NEA without a solid base of support to help it weather the storm. At this time, the highly visible products of the APP program became liabilities rather than assets.

Another example of an early APP project is Isaac Witkin's cor-ten steel Everglades, which sits in the middle of a barren concrete plaza in the center of downtown Springfield, Massachusetts, 1,500 miles from the sculpture's namesake. Built as part of a bicentennial revitalization project in 1976, the "urban park" soon became home to vandals and crime. Closed to the public within years of its initial opening, the park is now defunct indefinitely. In an effort to use cutting-edge design to place the small city "on the map," the sculpture brought Springfield forward into the future-right past the 200 years of tradition being commemorated in the bicentennial celebration. Almost 30 years later, there is no money to restore or resite the vandalized work. The sad and lasting repercussions of projects like this are the negative precedents set for public art in small cities that do not have the money or patience to waste on failed art projects. The people of Springfield are no longer inclined to take risks on new public art projects, even though some NEA grant money is still available to local arts organizations in the area.

The lack of support for the APP was due in part, no doubt, to the same perceptions of elitism and esoteric irrelevance that plagued the whole government arts apparatus at the time, including other NEA programs. Even the NEA eventually caught on to this, or at least paid lip service to the scale of the problem. As Gary O. Larson wrote in a 1997 book entitled *American Canvas: An Arts Legacy for Our Communities*:

In the course of its justifiable concern with professionalism, institution-building and experimentation during the 60's and 70's, the arts community neglected those aspects of participation, democratization and popularization that might have helped sustain the arts when the political climate turned sour.

If this was a problem in general, the crisis was even more pronounced regarding art in public places. Where else could federally funded art have owed more responsibility to its owners? Yet the trends in contemporary art and the needs and tastes of the general public were at odds. This is no new or unique phenomenon. But the debate highlighted the underlying issue: the tension between the "rights" of individual artists to create work without direction or input and the public's "right" to have effective and meaningful artwork that reflected people's needs, since they were paying for it. Rhetoric ran high on both sides.

Historian Michael Brenson captures the essence of the debate perfectly in his book *Visionaries and Outcasts: The NEA, Congress, and the Place of the Visual Arts in America*. From the perspective of the artists, "in its eagerness to root art into community and demonstrate art's potential for social good, the individual artist was thrown out." And yet, from the other side of the debate it looked as if "in its visual artists' fellowships program, in its Art in Public Places program, and in other visual arts programs, [the NEA] put artists on pedestals, which reinforced the predisposition of many people to feel that artists, and the NEA, were arrogant and disdainful." This conflict remained unresolved, especially in the APP program. And it was essentially the result of the NEA's inability to draw a distinction between public and gallery art.

Artists garner their authority both by creating successful works and by being met in a respectful context where their work is taken seriously. In a museum or gallery setting, the importance of art is taken for granted-people are there specifically to see it. These museums and galleries, in Brenson's words, "mobilized an aesthetic emotion whose specialness is defined, in part, by its separateness from everyday life." Yet in public spaces there is nothing to mobilize that sentiment. The art must relate to the viewer in a different way than is the case

in a gallery. This is proven by example after example of famous sculptors, such as George Sugarman and Richard Serra, generating very different reactions in the street than they do within the art institutions. When art meets everyday life, as it does in public art, the romantic justifications put forth by the institutional art world fall short of meeting our understood requirements for the public realm.

The NEA did eventually catch on to this distinction, but too late. As grant officer Kubli explained in an interview:

[In] the relationship of the object to the community, to the site, people began to ask that question, and the field began to ask that question. This is when the word "site-specific" appeared. And the "public art administrator" role began to surface.

In the latter part of the history of the program, the involvement of the community in many phases of the creation of public art became ... possible without disturbing the rights of the artists.... Over time, many artists developed skills of dealing with the community, in fact incorporated the relationship with the community before they came up with even the idea of what they wanted to do.

The APP program had begun to learn some of the important lessons of public art planning. But by the time the Endowment saw the need to revamp their programming, the effects of the APP's lack of public support spelled its undoing. When Congress forced the NEA to scale back its total budget dramatically, the APP was quietly erased.

"Plop art" in the plaza

Yet the downfall of the NEA's Art in Public Places needn't have been inevitable. At the same time that the APP was coming in for heightened scrutiny, another government art program was working to reinvent itself. The GSA's Art in Architecture Program came to recognize that it needed to think of public art as a special subsection of the art world. As a result, it reformed its commissioning system-and, more importantly, its attitude-to ensure that it was producing art for the community, instead of inflicting art on the community.



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[Photograph]

FIGURE 2

The high-rust mark of an attitude: Richard Serra's Tilted Arc, installed in 1981 and removed in 1989.

This really was a transformation for the agency, because it had itself perpetrated quite a few eyesores in its earlier history. One example is the Sea Flower installation, described above. In that instance, the GSA only placed an ugly work in a prominent place. But it was capable of much worse. With Richard Serra's Tilted Arc, the agency would reach a nadir by placing an ugly work right in everyone's way.

In 1981, the GSA commissioned Serra, an internationally renowned sculptor, to create a cor-ten steel wall running through the plaza in front of the federal court house in New York City. It was a disaster. Serra intended the dividing wall to have deep and disturbing implications, to underline the ways in which our public life and involvement with the government affect us. To make his artistic point, Serra deliberately designed a wall that would divide the plaza and appear to reroute walking traffic around his structure. Serra's subtle protest was purposely in direct conflict with the plaza's ease of use. Although its perceived interference with pedestrian traffic would ultimately spell the wall's doom, ironically it was a huge, defunct fountain in the plaza to one side of Tilted Arc that actually interrupted the walking path. To disable a public space to make such a modest point might also seem a colossal act of hubris, which would have been more acceptable if Serra had attached wheels to the piece so that it could be moved aside. But, with the exception of kinetic artists such as Niki Saint-Phalle and Jean Tinguely, a sense of humor has not been noticeably present in works of civic sculpture. So the fact remained: In this instance, the GSA's commitment to sponsoring a range of contemporary American art led it to commission a work that stood in direct opposition to the GSA's more central commitment to build and maintain functional public spaces.

Not only that, but while people could experience firsthand how this structure was supposedly inconveniencing them every day, its intended interpretation was so subtle or obscure that few people understood it. Without any

educational exhibit explaining Serra's intentions, the plaza users' annoyance inevitably trumped Serra's artistry. In 1985, judges in the courthouse led a petition drive in which 900 of the 1,300 occupants of the federal building signed on to a request to have Tilted Arc removed. This led to a three-day hearing on the issue, which pitted traditional artists, behavioral psychologists, and building users against New York City's modern art establishment. Finally, in 1989, and despite a rear-guard effort by the arts community to save the work, the GSA relented and Tilted Arc was removed.

The Tilted Arc fiasco and other lesser blunders point to fundamental questions with which the GSA grappled throughout the 1980s and early 1990s: Is public art valuable mainly as a force to bolster our traditions (as in oldtime statues of Founding Fathers located in our historic public parks), or as a force to encourage the artistic vanguard of the day even when that vanguard is destructive or revolutionary in nature? And is there a commitment in public art to the users and funders (the taxpayers) of the work that is different from the relationship between gallery art and the public?

At first, the GSA didn't get the answers quite right. One need look no further than the grandiose and selfcongratulatory wording of a citation from the Presidential Design Awards of 1984:

Installations that may have been judged by the press, critics, and others to be difficult to comprehend (or less than completely successful) are to be expected in such a courageous program.

In other words, "Art is great because we say it is, public opinion notwithstanding." Conspicuously missing was any acceptance of valid criticism of the program or its structure, let alone of the artworks it commissioned. It was precisely this type of attitude that had led to Tilted Arc three years earlier, and that would have pushed the GSA program into oblivion had not some more realistic voices started to make themselves heard within the GSA.

The first rumblings came in the mid 1980s, when regional building administrators began seeking more responsibility and accountability from publicly funded art. The first fruits of this effort came in the form of changes to the makeup of the panels responsible for commissioning artists for new projects. Until 1989, the GSA had used three-person panels comprising high-level arts professionals selected jointly by the GSA and NEA (a sign of the similarities between the two programs in their earlier history). But, in contrast to the NEA, regional offices in the GSA began to push for more input on projects.

Two things happened as a result: In 1989, the GSA expanded the size of these panels, so that decisions would now be made by a committee of 10. This involved a decisive split from the NEA, on which the GSA previously had relied for help in its commissioning process. But the NEA's preference for a curatorial approach was increasingly at odds with the needs of the GSA. Now the panels would include community representatives from outside the arts world-in their earliest incarnation, the larger panels included five such community representatives in addition to five arts professionals. This was a marked contrast to the NEA's policy of appointing only "peer professionals"-artists, curators, and field administrators to stand on selection panels. And the GSA would continue to demonstrate greater flexibility than the NEA, allowing the panel structure to evolve over time, such that they now include one nationally recognized arts professional, one local artist from the project area, a community representative, the project's architect, a representative of the GSA building client, and two GSA associates.

In 1996, Robert Peck, a new Commissioner of the Public Buildings Service at GSA, orchestrated a comprehensive review of the agency's art commissioning process. The former aide to Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan had a strong interest in public art and urban planning, and was concerned that the GSA program had taken a wrong turn. He streamlined the approach to commissioning, making it similar to local and state public art organizations that were changing with the times. These procedures, based on decisions made by selection panels with regional representatives, were more accountable to the local public that would have to live with the art. Without micromanaging, Peck worked to create a process that would be more sensitive to the community. In a recent interview, he stated that,

[previously], I didn't think that most of the artwork did squat for making the building, as they would sometimes say about the art program, "a more pleasant addition to its community." By the time I got there, GSA had decided that they were running a museum program or a sculpture garden program-what people refer to as "plop art."

It wasn't just the artworks themselves, Peck believed:

The GSA had a 30-year tradition of building [an unsuccessful building] and then putting a world-class piece of sculpture in it.... First, let's start doing good architecture that the people in the community will love.... second, let's see if we can really challenge artists to work with the building, use the art to create good places.

Peck's approach to the GSA program was marked by a great deal of welcome pragmatism about the business of government art patronage. He had worked at the NEA as the assistant director of the Federal Architecture Program and director of federal agency relations in the 1970s and seen firsthand their approach to public art, and was convinced that there was a better way. That would involve a more hands-on attitude toward artists. Peck had little patience for the argument that art and artists transcended, or at least should transcend, any sense of purpose:

[The NEA] influenced me in thinking that the dichotomy that the arts community often throws up, saying that as soon as you tell them that the art needs to serve a purpose you're somehow flouting the artist's creativity, is garbage.

And yet, in Peck's vision, this did not mean creating a climate of disrespect for, or suspicion of, artists. Rather, he saw that a more practical approach to public art could prove liberating. He recalls being told by artists that "there's actually nothing that's more intriguing and challenging than being told that ... the person commissioning your art actually has a purpose in it, and you need to do it within a context." And some aspects of Peck's vision enhanced the prestige of art and artists. He required that artists be hired for projects much earlier in the architectural design phase than had been the case before. This early hiring ensured that art wasn't cut at the last minute from overdrawn budgets. He required that artists have a hand in the design development review, a review of the plans for a building that occurs about a third of the way into a project. And although he introduced guidelines that were meant to ground the Art in Architecture program in the GSA's core building mission, he made sure that these guidelines were just vague enough to give artists some latitude:

We did also draw up some guidelines that said what we're looking for is art that works with the architecture. We tried not to define that too much because you don't want to tell people exactly what that means. We also said that we were looking for things that made the building a better, friendlier, more welcoming place in its community.

Public art's potential

The result of Peck's reforms is evident today, in works of public art that truly augment the spaces they are in, and that give enjoyment to the public. But the aftereffects of the Serra debacle still haunt the program.

In the plaza where Tilted Arc once sat, a landscape design now commands the space. While the celebrated landscape architect Martha Schwartz researched the needs of the plaza's users, the fanciful scheme has very limited artistic content, playing on the theme of New York's Olmsteadian parks. Schwartz conceives of her 1992 design artistically, although there is no official art element commissioned through the AiA program. The design helps to gloss over the plaza's tumultuous recent history, but it also neglects interesting elements of the location's past as Manhattan's largest fresh water source in the eighteenth century. This history had inspired Jane Greengold's temporary artwork "A Drop in the Bucket" in 1985. Surely, the plaza's more distant past could have been made a part of this design opportunity. Yet the plaza's refurbishment was not considered worthy of an official commission by a selection panel, even though 15 years earlier the space had been deemed significant enough to warrant a \$175,000 artwork.

The New York plaza is not alone. Federal plazas across the country now require renovations. While the GSA maintains that it uses public art as much as it ever did, situations like the New York refurbishment put the program's commitment to the test. Deciding whether such a project is a minor fix or a major refurbishment warranting an art commission is subjective, and comes down to the perspective of the building administrators. Their prior experiences with public art, from the worst case scenario of Tilted Arc to more positive examples, will impact future opportunities for art. As it is now, these plaza projects continue without public art, leading to many missed opportunities. Designs like Schwartz's, while artistic, do not benefit from the input and rigor that a commissioning process offers. In this sense, although the GSA appears willing to continue its AiA program in full force, the effects of poor planning from the Tilted Arc era still reverberate.

This seems especially unfortunate given the high quality of the work that the GSA is now commissioning when it does launch its new, more rigorous commissioning process. Consider the mural in the lobby of the Ronald Reagan Federal Building and Courthouse in Santa Ana, California. Local artist John Valadez depicts elements of Orange County's twentieth-century history in an architecturally integrated mural along the winding "piano wall" in the main lobby. The artist researched the area's cultural roots by attending fairs and seeking out historical photographs to craft a mural that depicts important aspects of Orange County life ranging from its traditional summer festivals to orange groves. The mural is a success on two fronts: First, it is accessible to the

building's employees and visitors, both physically and conceptually. And its subject matter ties the federal edifice (and the government it represents) to the local history and community. A far cry from Sea Flower, New Bedford's plop sculpture, this thoughtful integration displays a commitment to serving the public by bringing resonant, approachable art into the daily lives of the mural's real patrons.



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[Photograph]

FIGURE 3

The new face of the GSA: John Valadez's mural in Santa Ana, California, captures a slice of local life.

Attitude adjustment

The GSA's procedural evolution from 1967 to the present, bringing building users and local arts professionals into the commissioning process, results in more approachable and likable artworks that actually reflect the values and preferences of the communities that have to contend with the art long after the administrators have gone away. But it was the flexible and practical attitude of the GSA that encouraged the program's transformation. What makes the GSA's story refreshing is that it reflects a bureaucracy's ability to respond to changing circumstances. The results are particularly interesting since the GSA chooses to furnish art—it is under no legal mandate to do so. Recognizing that there is no regulatory safety net to preserve the program, administrators have realized that local support ensures the program's future. While not losing sight of fundamental artistic ideals, they know that along with a serious price tag on public art comes a serious responsibility to provide something meaningful to the public.

At the NEA, restructuring did little to resolve the confusion over its central purpose. Is the NEA a financial booster for the independent work of artists as selected by national curators, or is it charged with fostering a strong relationship between the public and the arts nationwide? The APP withered on the vine because it did not produce enough projects catering to local constituencies. Even without the umbrella of the APP program, enterprises that produce public art still receive some of the NEA's grants. The theory is that this decentralized approach—channeling the money through local arts organizations—will deliver more responsive public artwork. This structure is unquestionably better at adapting to community needs. But it has still dodged a key question: How can a granting agency operate responsibly with no systematic way of reviewing the effectiveness of its past decisions?

One sign that the old, elitist attitudes have not changed is that there is no method for assessing the NEA's past grants. There is merely a system of casual final reports that go straight into the filing cabinet. Not only did the NEA trust its artists and believe in their right to create their best work unfettered, but it had no way of gauging whether past projects were successful in anyone's view. The Endowment relied on the grapevine to spread the word on the good, the bad, and the ugly.

This lack of organized hindsight has haunted the NEA's evolution. In 2002, SOS! (Save Outdoor Sculpture, a project of the independent nonprofit institute Heritage Preservation) attempted to catalog the NEA's 650 APP projects from 1967 through 1992. Most of the files (many incomplete or out of date) were buried in the NEA's archives, and hardly anyone at the Endowment seemed to be interested in the program's history. When Bert Kubli retired, the former APP grants officer volunteered his time to archive APP project files for the benefit of future historians. He quit his attempt after four years, citing lack of cooperation from the staff. To this day, it is difficult to unearth information about the program. When we wanted to find out simple facts, such as when review-panel composition changed, as part of our research for this article, we discovered that current administrators didn't know. We were told to file a Freedom of Information Act request.

This lack of transparency was designed in part to shield the Endowment from overly critical media, but it has also prevented self-analysis and growth. The experience in the NEA has been that a spotlight on its programs creates a backlash from legislators looking to tighten budgets. Some of the criticism may well be unfair, but that's no reason to dismiss all criticism altogether. Furthermore, a solid program that's responsible to the needs of its constituency can withstand occasional controversies. The NEA remains purposefully hands-off in order to let the arts coterie set its own direction. The Endowment may be understandably wary of imposing a federal agenda on the art world, but the key to Peck's reform of the GSA program was his willingness to impose accountability on the arts bureaucracy. Such accountability necessarily requires good internal record-keeping

to facilitate the development of valuable institutional memory. The NEA is out of the glare of public scrutiny for the time being. But without any way of learning from its past mistakes, and even lacking any apparent desire to do so, one wonders if it is only a matter of time before the Endowment is in the hot seat again. In a field where any press can be bad press, the issue requires a thoughtful dialogue rather than the usual degeneration into vitriolic name-calling between the "populist philistines" and the "aesthetic standard-setters."

Arts bureaucracies are still bureaucracies

Perhaps the most significant difference between the evolutionary paths of the NEA and GSA public art programs lies in their views of themselves. GSA's Art in Architecture proved successful thanks to the leadership of administrators who recognized that even an arts bureaucracy is still a bureaucracy, where responsible procedures produce good results. That means that to be successful, it needs to be willing to organize itself under some principle of accountability to the taxpayers who fund it. In fact, its success depends on the commissioning of high-quality art that is accessible to the public. But the GSA program does prove that, in order for public arts patronage to be a success, artistic bureaucrats and bureaucratic artists need to recognize that they are not operating in a vacuum, subject only to the whims of curators.

At a time when American cities and sprawling suburbs increasingly need the "place-making" that public art can provide, and with growing experience among arts administrators at the local level, there is a vast potential for federal arts programs to do great things. Of course, it is neither possible nor desirable to create art that is foolproof, art to which nobody will object. That is a fatuous goal and an impossible standard. But we need a realistic assessment of risk. Rather than having bureaucrats hoisting themselves on their own petards in the defense of an abstract notion of artistic integrity, it is time for policy makers to learn from the cautionary tales of those landscapes blighted by earlier works of public art. Indeed, strong programs that define procedures not only for recruiting local talent but also for understanding local conditions will help works of art to weather healthy criticism. The task for commissioners and grantors is this: How can you meet the needs of your constituency? Even El Greco had a patron, a client who directed him to paint on the theme of Christ Driving the Money Changers from the Temple. Working under that constraint did not thwart El Greco's distinctive artistic contribution.

The first step is doing your community homework. What makes a meaningful place? It is usually a combination of factors including uses, scale, street furniture and amenities, quality materials, and public art and craft. Asking questions about the space, a process we call "environmental profiling," is really the basis for the commissioning process, and should also have an important role in evaluating applications from artists in a grant-making program such as the NEA's. Obviously, locals are going to be more intuitively aware of the environmental factors of a place, but there is value in didactically spelling it out in the procedures that the panel develops. Indeed, the creative tension between behavioral patterns, artistic traditions, the physical design constraints and opportunities inherent in a particular space (such as being located in a historic district), and the historical and cultural context can be incredibly useful and productive. The community then has some ownership stake in the metaphors that come out of this process.

The point is not to create art that caters to the lowest common denominator of populist consensus, but rather art that finds its inspiration in a certain contextual rigor—art that challenges the public rather than approaching it with contempt. At the end of the day, bureaucratic procedures that facilitate this will give us art in which we can believe, and programs that will survive.

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