A History of Public Art in the US **Cynthia Deng**

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The history of public art in the US is dynamic and ever shifting, with its roots in Europe and the actions of the federal government. In the last half century, public art has taken on a life of its own and has proliferated across many forms, sites, and target audiences. Before we discuss public art, we need to define what it is. Yet its definition is often controversial and evolving over time. While public art has flourished throughout the history of the country, there is still a lack of coherent definitions, theory, strategies, or objectives. Public art has evolved so much that its definitions have been questioned and the meaning of "public" has transformed. A traditional definition would be "art placed in public places and spaces [that are] open to everyone to use and enjoy" (Knight, viii), but that only defines public art in terms of its physical accessibility. It leaves out the issues of public funding and ownership, the role of the public in the conception and design of the art, the public spirit that arises from its interaction and engagement with the people, and the issue of the identity of the "public." Yet all of these topics are necessary considerations and important aspects of public art. This paper will broadly trace the evolutions of style, patronage, form, and theory, as well as the evolution of the meaning of "public" art. After outlining comprehensively its history, the paper will move on to discuss the general directions of the evolution and project its future trajectory.

The current scope and functions of public art are nearly boundless. It is obvious that public art "isn't a hero on a horse anymore" (Raven, 1). Yet too often people come to narrowly define public art as generally permanent, architecturally defined sculptural works in urban plazas and city centers (Jones, 7). The scope of public art has expanded from architectural sculpture and architecture itself to monuments, memorials and civic statues to the current often surprising range of forms, including street furniture, outdoor sculpture, graffiti, interactive installations, digital film, performance. Sculptures and installations can be permanent or temporary. Art can respond to and incorporate the environment. When placed in an arbitrary location, it can be produced and owned by a community, with or without government patronage or corporate investment. It can be "self consciously avant-garde" or stay rooted in the heritage culture (Jones, 11). As far as function goes, public art historically is "placed to garner the attention [of larger audiences], meant to provide an edifying commemorative or entertaining experience, and convey[s] messages through generally comprehensible content" (Knight, 1). It was used to reinforce the agenda of the people in power, through portraits and statues of rulers to inspire loyalty, or street monuments to show off military prowess (Knight, 1). But now public art functions to build communities, foster dialogue, or encourage discussion of difficult issues. More practically, it can promote urban recovery, attract investment or cultural tourism, add to the value of land, increase the use of open spaces, and humanize the environment (Jones, 11). The spectrum of forms, methods, and agendas has proliferated especially in recent decades. How did public art in the US arrive at such a huge scope and multiplicity of functions?

The earliest western public art, which can be found in ancient Greek and Roman cities, was mostly limited to architecture or architectural sculptures. In the middle ages and the Renaissance, it came in the form of monumental art and architectural embellishments that asserted the power of the ruling class or religion. During periods of colonization, countries would show their dominance with the public display of art taken from a conquered country (Goldstein, ix). However, the idea of art "in the service of the people, rather than ruling factions, is a more modern concept" (Knight, 2). Indeed, early works of public art in the US looked to Europe for precedence, and consequently much of 18th and 19th century public art is monumental sculpture and architecture that established and consolidated

power structures (Goldstein, ix). Symbolic and narrative decorative art in public spaces and buildings took the forms of leaders and heroes (Goldstein, ix). The American Renaissance from the late 19th century to the start of World War I saw a period of self-confidence, the "City Beautiful" movement, and a proliferation of Beaux-Arts architecture. [In 1872, Henry Fox and Charles Howell founded the Fairmount Park Art Association in Philadelphia, which was the first private nonprofit organization that integrate public art and urban planning (Knight, 2)].

The 20th century held many radical developments in the field of public art. In this period, the US adopted the position that the government had a legitimate role in the funding of public art, federal patronage of art became official, and art programs appeared all over the country at more local levels. As a result the public art accelerated into a profusion of new forms and styles.

World War I shook people's belief in the traditional styles of the past, and in the 1930s the Great Depression brought on the relief programs of the New Deal. The Roosevelt presidency's Works Progress Administration (WPA) included the Federal Art Project (FAP), which was the first and largest comprehensive federally funded art program (Knight, 3). From 1933 to 1943, thousands of artists created over a hundred thousand works of art, and under the FAP these artworks were distributed to state and municipal facilities (Knight, 4). The Treasury began the two relief programs related to art: the Temporary Relief Art Project (TRAP) (1935-1939) and the Section of Fine Arts (called Section for short) (1934-1943). Both, especially Section, brought art into everyday life in places like post offices and libraries, with murals of familiar things depicted in familiar ways (Knight, 5). In a way, Section began to make art truly public, making it available and accessible to all, regardless of background or class. These New Deal programs showed the importance of art in a democracy, built up the public art collection in the US, and set the stage for federal arts funding (Knight, 5).

Section also instituted the influential percent-for-art policy idea: 1% of the total building construction cost would be set aside for the building's "embellishment" (Knight, 4). Later on in 1963, the General Services Administration (GSA), overseer of federal construction projects, started the Art-in-Architecture program (A-i-A) which also implemented a 1%-for-art policy. This policy became a model for many state and municipal community art programs: in 1959, Philadelphia passed the first municipal level percent-for-art ordinance. Soon on Philadelphia's heels were Baltimore (1964), San Francisco (1967), and Seattle (1973). In 1967, Hawaii became the first state to adopt the percent-for-art policy.

A-i-A shaped public art theory in America with its philosophies: A-i-A operated under the belief that public art should be owned and physically accessible by the people and the works of art should be understood to be the people's property (Knight, 7). So public art became more "public" or citizen owned. The program also recognized the importance of site specificity, promoting site sensitive art that considered "the location" as a part of their creative process (Knight, 7).

In 1965, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) founded its Art-in-Public-Places (A-i-P-P), which was the first time that substantial federal tax-based funds were given to arts spending on local levels (Knight, 15). A-i-P-P aimed to distribute art regardless of social and socioeconomic conflict, and its program to provide matching federal funds for community-sponsored projects was a "self-consciously democratic process" open to debate and scrutiny (Knight, 15). However, the program came under governmental attack after 1979 (Knight, 17).

Today there are over 300 government funded art programs in the US, (and many public-private partnerships, private agencies, and corporation investments) (Knight, 8). Government patronage in the

US has given public art a broader role in people's daily lives (Goldstein, ix), [[[and has make the art more truly "public" in the sense that people are in part the owners of the art.]]] However, these has been a concern that government patronage could sometimes just encourage "plop art," lone incomprehensive urban sculptures "resting awkwardly in but unrelated to its vast surroundings" (Knight, 8) in an effort to satisfy the percent-for-art quota. Another criticism is that the percent-for-art programs lead to "minimum basic standard that ultimately begets mediocrity and thwarts creative potential" (Phillips, 93), and that when navigating the bureaucracy, many of the most creative and innovative work may be streamlined in favor of more conventional aesthetic appeal. As Goldstein laments, the "art of public art is in danger of being extinguished through strategized solutions and commodified aesthetics… [of] complacent and complicit administrators and artists" (Goldstein, 86).

While government patronage for the arts and public ownership is important in the consideration of public art, it is not the only indicator of public art. In fact, often the most effective, inviting, and "civic-spirited" art comes from private ventures or public-private partnerships instead of the purely public countertypes (Knight, x).

Public patronage was not the only development for public art in the 20th century. This was also the dawn of modernism and International Style architecture, a time when architects started casting off traditional ornament. Public art in this period fulfilled some of the same roles as previous public art, but now the subject on display was the art itself rather than a hero figure (Goldstein, ix). Beginning from the 1960s, large-scale abstract sculpture began rising, partially due to the concurrent period of urban renewal in the US (Art Encyclopedia 2012). Sculpture had started to separate from monument with Rodin and Brancuzi at the end of the 19th century (Morris, 253), but this century witnessed the dematerialization the art object. According to Michael North, this "disappearance of sculpture" began with the self-destructing machine sculpture project Homage to New York by Jean Tinguely, which attempted to destroy itself at the MoMA in 1960 (North, 9). Since then, many sculptors have been moving towards ways to make their works "invisible, immaterial, or remote" (North, 9). There has been a de-emphasis on the material aspects of sculptures such as attractiveness, uniqueness, permanence (Suderberg, 2). One of the reasons why artists are going by this route is that they are trying to prevent their works from becoming a market commodity: if their works are so intangible, they cannot be sold (North, 10).

Soon after the "disappearance" of traditional sculpture, a proliferation of new forms of art emerged. One type that started gaining in popularity in the 1980s is temporary art: installations or operations that are meant to last for certain duration of time before ending. Barbara Goldstein suggests that permanent works may demonstrate a commitment to civic space, whereas temporary projects have less conviction and less concept of place (Goldstein, 96). However, times are changing so fast that it becomes quite difficult for permanent work to be immediately relevant and urgent (Jones, 38). In fact, Patricia Phillips says, "the presence of enduring objects has become as quixotic as time itself" (Phillips, 295). Temporary art on the other hand can be most flexible and relevant to the changing times, able to provide a sense of urgency or to probe the relationships between "lasting values and current events" (Phillips, 304). It allows artists to speak to specific social or physical contexts at a specific time. Working in temporary art also reduces fear of failure, encourages experimentation, and makes artists engage difficult ideas (Jones, 38). There are fewer material limitations because the material does not need to last. Under the banner of temporary art are other forms of art such as performative art, place-bound art (like video installations, standing installations) and centrifugal art (like posters or cards). The digital technologies of the Internet age provide a whole host of new mediums and forms of public art. With the advent of new technologies, the pace of public and private life has accelerated; things are changing so fast that one often faces questions of permanence, ephemerality, indeterminacy, and

stability. Temporary art provides an appropriate and relevant means to explore these contemporary questions. Even temporary artworks have some degree of permanence through photographs, recreations, postcards, and books (Jones, 38). The art may end physically, but it can continue to provoke social exchange and public dialogue (Goldstein, 99).

As mediums and forms proliferated and government patronage grew, public art was making more appearances in people's daily lives and taking on greater roles in public life (Goldstein, ix). The definition of "public" has shifted from generally physically accessible, to outdoor art, to publically funded and owned art, to civic-minded audience-centric art. Now one prevailing idea is that "sculpture becomes public by taking the spatial experience of its audience as a subject" (North, 10). This means that artists now have to change the way they conceive of and design public art. For public artists, this is a shift from the "inner space of the artist's psyche to the exterior space of public convention" (North, 10). No more is the most effective art about their own private emotions or needs; they have to subjugate those private matters with concern for the public audience and site.

Because the A-i-A commissioning artists to "respond to particular places" (Knight, 8), there was a growing adherence to site sensitive design. In fact, site specificity gained momentum partially because the A-i-A especially espoused it as one of their guiding philosophies (Knight, 7). Particular locations were taken into consideration in the creative process, and often the work was conceived, designed, and executed to maintain an interaction between the site and art (Knight, 7). Soon artists started moving away from creating "art in public places" and instead created "public art [that] reinforces sense of place and occasion" (Goldstein, ix). They moved away from placing artworks in public spaces, and instead created the public realm with their work.

With the bounds of public art stretched anew nearly constantly in recent years and without a clear definition or theory pinned down, many theoretical and practical issues have become the grounds for debate, both now and in the past. Two of the major issues have been and are what makes public art "public" (or what is "public") and what constitutes the "public."

Frescos of European cathedrals used to define "public art" (Miles, 15), but now the art encompasses much more than architectural decoration and the bounds are less clear. Traditionally, public art is art that is created for and sited in a space accessible to the general public (Art Encyclopedia 2012). However, physical accessibility is only one of the factors that make public art "public." Public art could also be an umbrella term for works of art purchased with public funds and government patronage (Art Encyclopedia 2012), but that becomes a technical definition that does not involve the people who comprise the "public." Public art should then be art that was conceived and created with the experience of the audience or public as the subject. Artists should "make the sculpture public by making the public part of the sculpture" (North, 23). Regardless of funding, public art should engage with and involve the people and the environment where it is sited. Phillips believes that publicness is a psychological rather than a physical or environmental contruct (Phillips, 93). In this case, the reactions and interactions that the audiences have with the art is a measure of the extent of the art's publicness. Perhaps Knight is right that art is most public when it is an "extension of emotional and intellectual, as well as physical, accessibility to the audience" (Knight, x). Public art is mostly public because of its accessibility, its engagement with the environment, and its involvement with the audience.

But who is this "audience", this "public"? In the US, there may not be a "general public;" there is only a "diversity of specific publics" (Miles, 84). The American society is such a pluralistic society divided by region, culture, socioeconomic status, and other divisions such that there is not one "unitary

national aesthetic" (Knight, xi). So the public for each piece of public art is slightly different.

Now situated at the line between the past and the present, at the peak end of the evolution so far, what is going to be the direction of public art from here? Given the proliferation of digital technologies, certainly no plateau of production can be extrapolated. From their research, Jones and Miles seem to think that art is headed in a direction where no art is truly public. Jones quotes art historian Jonathan Harris: "Public art, like architecture, is the economic and intellectual property of a set of professional elites who use of public resources generally has no recourse to any kind of democratic process" (Jones, 8). He claims that "public" art is never truly public because works are privately commissioned, selected by a small group of individuals, and its audience is limited to site goers (Jones, 28). Even electronic media that is public in accessibility is consumed in domestic places and controlled by corporations (Miles, 15). Their arguments need an explicit definition of public art. If he is thinking of public art as the blanket term for all art that is purchased with public funds and so owned by the people, then they are correct that the public art is rarely ever public. But if it takes complete public funding, few things are actually truly public in their sense of the word. However, taking public to referits accessibility, its engagement with the environment, and its involvement with the audience, there is a whole different set of criteria to judge from, and it does not matter if the "people" do not completely own the public art.

One can make the argument that public art is turning towards the direction where all art is public. As we are in the age of ever improving digital technologies, that whole new branch of medium has the potential to be completely public. Museums, TV, color films, photography in press are all bringing art into the public arena (Miles, 15), and with the easy dissemination of information and images and ideas, art is becoming increasingly accessible in the US. Mitchell says that the "publicness" of public images goes well beyond their specific sites on the Internet. Phillips notes, "the encounter of public art is ultimately a private experience" (Phillips, 304). That is an undeniable paradox, but the fact that those encounters and experiences take place means that the art is public to some extent. For an art to be truly public, it must inspire many private experiences between itself and the public.