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What's So Public about Public Art?

by Neilson MacKay

Who likes public art? More to the point, whom is it for? Ostensibly, it's for *us*, which is all good and well. But who decides what we get? In New York, more often than not, it's the Public Art Fund. Its last big project, *Discovering Columbus*, was sized up by James Panero in his piece for *The Wall Street Journal* back in September. The PAF says it's sending "a message that the arts are alive in this city," which is great news for everyone. But is it really? And what's so "public" about public art anyway?

The PAF was founded in 1977 by Doris C. Freedman. From 1971 to 1980 she was the president of City Walls Inc., a nonprofit founded in part by Tania Lewin, a Polish contemporary artist best known for her murals on the Lower East Side. In 1971 Freedman founded the Public Arts Council under the wing of the Municipal Art Society. During the Lindsay Administration she served as New York City's Director of Cultural Affairs, a post now filled by Kate D. Levin, who looks after a quadrennial capital budget of \$630 million, propping up an army of cultural organizations including today's PAF. In 1977 Freedman merged City Walls Inc. and the Public Arts Council to form the Public Art Fund. Over the years the PAF has funded over four hundred public exhibitions throughout the five boroughs. Its goal has been to "offer the public powerful experiences with art and the urban environment."

Its latest project is Monika Sosnowska's *Fir Tree*, (showing, felicitously, in Doris C. Freedman Plaza [60th Street and Fifth Avenue]) a forty-foot-tall hamstrung spiral staircase shaped like an evergreen tree. The PAF say Sosnowska's "site-specific interventions... challenge our perceptions and expectations of architectural space." Purportedly *Fir Tree* "echoes the industrial steel staircases found on the exterior walls of Polish housing blocks."

But what's so *public* about public art? Is it "public" simply because it's stuck in public places? And who asks for it? In a recent interview with *Manner of Man Magazine*, Alexander Stoddart, Sculptor in Ordinary to Her Majesty the Queen in Scotland, hits the nail on the head:

No-one ever refers to the “public art” we find standing in Florence in Orcagna’s Loggia, nor to the “public art” we see among the ruins of Delos or Athens. Public art is, in fact, a form of the private art of the contemporist imperium simply foisted upon the unhappy populace.

Public art, (or at least, what public art has come to mean) is private art. Of course, no-one asks for it, but that’s not the problem. Its subject is not “us”, but “them.” By this I mean that public art is not the product of things *shared* – values, history or culture – but the product of its artist (and its patrons). Instead of asking questions about our shared experience, we find ourselves asking about something else: the artist (*Tradition and the Individual Talent*, anyone?) In this sense, public art is the opposite of the monument, which is the true public work of art. For traditionalists this is a familiar headache. Stoddart asks:

Can you tell me, straight off the top of your head, who was the sculptor of Mount Rushmore, or the Christ at Rio, or even the Statue of Liberty? You cannot, and this is because the monumental imperative drives away the name of the maker in these wonderful cases. But that enlarged Baseball Bat? That Curtain of fabric slung across a canyon? That bird-man standing in the North of England? They are, above all, an Oldenberg, a Christo, a Gormley. Thus public art is not only private in truth, it is also highly egotistical. These things do not belong to culture, but

merely to that thing which culture, unfortunately, has come to mean – which is “creativity”; a kind of arty itch that is scratched for relief but to no avail and and maintains what they call the “cultural industries” as a widening wound, festering.

What sort of experience does the PAF expect us to have with *Fir Tree*? Its subject is incognizable. Its purpose, if any, is to *not belong*. Above all, it is unexpected; something which, at first blush, seems exciting. We are invited to “interact” with our public art, or in the worst cases, to “play with it.” But is this enough? Professedly, *Fir Tree* does more. It is not just an upside down spiral staircase, but a “dialogue,” a “discourse,” or at worst, an “intervention,” But it “intervenes” in

our lives in the way only something prodigiously tasteless ever could; making its impact, as Stoddart says, “much as a demented person makes his impact on a bus queue or other location where people are trapped.”

These sculptures are, of course, all temporary. Most of the PAF’s projects are taken down within six months or so. They exist for the present. As Stoddart points out, monuments do something different. They are not there just to remind us of our past, but to remind us that the present is fugacious, and moreover, that a future will come. In short, they *still* us. They bestride the arc of history, and in doing so, demonstrate our place within that history. They remind us of things *shared*. He writes:

What I loved, and love, about the Monument is that its subject is not “now”, but “then”. And the Monument survives all the “nows” it goes through to exist in many other “thens”, extending into the very distant future, far away from us. It links the past with the future and in the process demonstrates the strange fatuity of the “now”. This is why the Monument was much castigated in the recent past,

and it also explains why political leftists (left-liberals) have such a dyspeptic attitude to the Monument or statue. It refuses to take part in the “dialectic” but rather postulates something immutable and lasting. Its mind, to speak, is concentrated on the distance, which is blue in colour.

Could there be anything more public than that?

A Full listing of The Public Art Fund’s projects can be seen [here](#). The full interview with Alexander Stoddart can be read [here](#).

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