

# Public Arts, Meet Professional Practices

Ellen Owens 16 May 2012

**Art washes away from the soul the dust of everyday life. –Pablo Picasso**

## **More People, More "Place Making," More Art**

For the first time in 50 years, the 2010 Census reported that Philadelphia's population increased by 0.6 percent, a seemingly small margin. But compared to the previous decades of decline in aging industrial cities such as Philadelphia, Baltimore and Chicago, this tiny growth spurt is an enormous leap (Steuer 2011). As our population develops, so do construction, renovation, gentrification, civic engagement and community-building efforts. Public artworks are an important part of initiatives to increase the quality of life through the activation of forgotten or neglected spaces (PennPraxis 2009). The Philadelphia City Government has placed particular importance on the benefits of arts and culture by creating the Office of Arts, Culture and the Creative Economy in 2008 and hiring Gary Steuer (former President & CEO of the Arts & Business Council and Vice President of Private Sector Affairs for Americans for the Arts) to head this department as Chief Cultural Officer.

For the purposes of this discussion, public art is defined as any form of art that can be accessed free of charge by the public but not contained inside a museum or gallery. Traditionally, these would be political or historical monuments or murals, but public works include new media like the permanent LED light installations by the Center City District along Broad Street, temporary installations such as the Miss Rockaway Armada rafts on the Schuylkill River (see Picture 1) (Steinburg n.d.), and other imaginative formats. Graffiti was not considered; however, one may argue that the wheat pastes by notable street artists such as Shepard Fairey and Swoon could be catalogued with public art as well. The idea of accessibility is crucial to creating public works. If less than 10 percent of the population can appreciate the work, then it is likely not serving its designated role.



Picture 1. *Let Me Tell You About a Dream I Had*, a commission of The Miss Rockaway Armada by the Philadelphia Art Alliance. The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage supported the project through a grant from the Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative. Photograph by Nicole Steinberg, courtesy of The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage."

Despite the economic decline, public arts projects have increased, perhaps to catalyze positive social change through more aesthetically-pleasing and expressive environments. A recent PennPraxis study of Philadelphia's public art collection found nearly 5,000 different works, ranging from murals to monuments to abstract sculptures (PennPraxis 2009).

Public art service providers have also multiplied, strengthened and diversified. The Redevelopment Authority Percent for Fine Arts Program, Mural Arts Program, Fairmount Park Art Association, and Pew Charitable Trusts, along with a host of other smaller groups and individuals, have boosted permanent and semi-permanent public works throughout the city. Many other types of cultural organizations and arts festivals have begun to interpret their collections, architecture and history through temporary or permanent public pieces (e.g., DesignPhiladelphia, the Fringe Festival, Hidden City, American Philosophical Society).

As public artwork efforts proliferate, more obstacles and challenges arise. Budget cuts and lack of community

understanding affect the quality of the work, its location and subject matter.

How can we mediate these problems and provide valuable tools to maintain this neighborhood improvement technique? I'm not seeking to answer the philosophical question of who owns and determines content for public work, but rather suggesting helpful infrastructures that unite artists, curators and organizations involved in this topic.

Little training and professional development resources are available for those curating or creating these public artworks. The discipline lacks a professional organization for discussion, definitions for best practices, and possible success measures. Education and development for artists within this genre is also deficient. By providing increased resources for the field, Philadelphia can improve and sustain the public propagation of art.

## **A Multitude of Aptitudes: The Public Artist**

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Fabulous fine art credentials and an impressive portfolio generate media interest for public artworks. However, they don't guarantee fantastic audience interface. Similarly, lack of technical skills and little artistic vision can distill the impact and quality of public works. The process for how

artists are chosen for these projects varies greatly from organization to organization and individual to individual. The production location and techniques also affect the necessary skill sets: if the work is produced on-site, the artist must constantly interface with curious passersby; if it's produced in a studio, the audience doesn't become as relevant until the work is delivered to its designated setting.

A public artist may assume various roles, including curator, educator, caretaker, historian, community interpreter and mediator. Many of the artists creating celebrated public works are nationally recognized, but earn their fame through more traditional gallery works rather than bigger pieces with an equally larger-scale audience. From working with artists such as Winifred Lutz, Isaiah Zagar and Delia King, I believe many public artists get introduced through informal apprenticeships, provocative open requests for proposals, or simply an interesting opportunity for exposure (see Picture 2).



Picture 2. *The Heart of Baltimore Ave*, painted by David Guinn, was the product of several meetings between the Mural Arts Program and the community.

Many who dislike traditional gallery settings or creating art alone in their studios drift into the field. Artists who wish to speak to or about audiences that do not enter galleries or museums, such as refugee, immigrant and impoverished groups, also create public works. Others are inspired by site-specificity, interpreting the history, science or another narrative about the location where the work is installed. And some do it to "give" back to their community. But "learning by doing" seems like a strange approach for projects meant to be somewhat permanent fixtures in the urban landscape. The artists currently making public works are painters, sculptors, installation artists and more. However this doesn't mean that they've

had appropriate training to contend in the public arena.

## **Envisioning the Future: Public Arts Education**

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In formal art education programs, students are encouraged to express themselves through their media: painting, drawing, sculpture, ceramics, etc. This process is subjective, with very little thought placed on the viewpoint of a general viewer. Students are first trained to visually communicate basic concepts to strengthen their rendering skills, then move on to express their own ideas to engage their conceptual abilities. Work is often about personal experience and process, with critiques centering on relationships between student works as compared to the works of other artists and their conceptual strengths.

Perhaps Philadelphia art schools could provide a certificate program, minor, or even an advanced degree track that encompasses public art practice. Some schools offer arts education programs that allow students to explore community arts work; however, these do not provide some of the necessary components to prepare students for the public arts field. Tyler School of Art, for example, offers courses with faculty that create public works, such as the renowned Pepón Osorio (see Picture 3). A certificate program or continuing education course

could allow those who have already attained their Bachelor's or Master's of Fine Arts to return for missing educational components to enter public practices with more informed perspectives.



Picture 3. Pepón Osorio created the installation *I have a story to tell you...* through the Fairmount Park Art Association by utilizing photographs collected from Philadelphia Latino community members.

First and most obvious of this potential “palette” for education should be art history courses that focus on solely public works. Currently, many classes aren't specific to public art and its subsequent issues, but rather scatter them into a general chronological overview of

contemporary art or themes based on subject matter. Through the mistakes and victories of our predecessors, newcomers can learn from the past before plunging into their own careers.

Museum training is another consideration for those creating public works: these courses may include curatorial studies, education practices for museums and cultural settings, and exhibition design. Though public arts are featured in less-controlled settings, museum studies courses place value on the translation of ideas into concepts that can be absorbed by much of the general public and foster understanding for key issues explored in public exhibitions. Museum design considers how the body interfaces with space and objects, but within a learning context.

Art education courses could assist those artists collaborating with the community to create their works and also to translate ideas of "place making" into their practice. Other practical creative and design-oriented classes could include architectural or landscape architecture studies, industrial design, engineering or city planning. These could decrease repair work and functionality within the existing urban terrain (Rush 2011).

Public speaking and negotiation skills could help arbitrate the process, since often the project must be pitched to the community, funders or decision-makers. The ability to understand the audience and articulate ideas clearly

would provide defense from diverse critiques and promote greater understanding for well-meaning intentions.

Finally, a class on copyrighting and legal issues would also be useful so the artist understands both the rights to the work they have made, as well as the responsibility they have for placing a work within the public realm. In other cities, citizens have become outraged by licensing rights imposed on city-funded public arts projects or by the artists themselves. Chicago's Millennium Park, for example, attempted to limit photography of the art in the park to those obtaining permits (Peerless 2005).

## **Advisories and Advocates: Providing Structure and Resources**

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Currently, the oldest, and consequently, primary groups within the cultural community determine the "best practices" for public art (Higgins 2011). When the Fairmount Park Art Association unleashed its campaign, New•Land•Marks, its mission was "To understand the community, not merely to decorate it" (Balkin Bach 2001). This message is a powerful vehicle for community-building and serves as an ideal model for privately-funded and city-funded public art programs alike.

Through a competitive application process, the Pew

Center for Arts and Heritage at the Pew Charitable Trust provides training and funding resources for a small portion of the public projects that engage high-level curators, artists and organizations. Committed to stimulating civic life, Pew has been a vehicle for several important Philadelphia projects and subsequent professional evaluation of these projects.

Beyond this, few resources are available to others in the field who seek self-enrichment through membership, mentorship or professional interest groups. Site-specificity, economic factors and cultural differences make it difficult to create nationwide or worldwide parallels, but now is a prime opportunity to engage curators, leaders and organizations in an organization devoted to issues of public art.

Within Philadelphia, information about “best practices” is not disseminated and seems to be largely determined by who receives foundation support. Funding is a key issue for the overall quality and subjects within the art; however, some “golden rules” could be established for consideration in organizations of all sizes and statures.

Who might sit on the advisory board for such a group? Seats would include leaders within well-functioning public arts organizations, key arts advocates from the Philadelphia Cultural Alliance, and seasoned public artists. It also many include representation of public education and design fields: a community arts educator or art

therapist, a city planner, a museum design expert, and an architect. Finally, it would include Philadelphia city officials such as the Chief Cultural Consultant, Managing Director and Redevelopment Authority. The Public Arts group could have member options and specialized committees for permanent and temporary works, along with particular disciplines such as murals, sculptures and new media. There, clearer guidelines for best practices could be born and evolve along with the contemporary urban landscape.

## **Empowering Perspectives for Future Engagement**

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Through providing greater professional training for artists and an excellent network for communication about hot topics, best practices and collaborative opportunities, the expectations and support for public art can soar to new levels and draw national attention for Philadelphia. Using models suggested by PennPraxis and Fairmount Park Art Association, public art can combine with efforts for community development, urban greening and other types of revitalization methodologies (Balkin Bach 2001). Interactive elements, such as project modification through texting, twittering or other technological means, will provide exciting new ways to engage citizens in the conversation.

Fresh collaborations will strengthen resources and build powerful messages—that these works are not made in “silos” but together in unity from multiple viewpoints. Rather than homogenizing artistic methods, the public arts professional organization will push for innovation in artistic expression and multiple viewpoints. The signature “style” of individual artists will not be lost, but perhaps translated into new communication methods. Artists will know their rights and have greater insight to the previous canon of public works.

In its recommendations for the future of Philadelphia public arts, the PennPraxis study suggests that the Office of Arts, Culture and the Creative Economy take the lead on the surveying and pairing of resources, successful projects, and planning/implementation of major new works (PennPraxis 2009). While the city government may not be the ideal place for this power to rest, it would provide a powerful message to major urban municipalities that Philadelphia believes strongly in the power of art to enhance lives.

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