

# Public Opinion/Public Art

*I Don't Know Anything About Art,  
But I Know What I Like!*

## What About Graffiti?

Is graffiti art? Is it public art? It is exhibited in public, but not funded with public money. Does that make it public art – or not? Since it is illegal in most places, does that make it a crime and therefore not art? Do you have graffiti in your city or town? Do you have public art in your city or town? Who funded that art? Sometimes private donors supply the funds and choose the art for the entire community, like in Newark, Ohio, where a rich banker provided the money and chose the art for the community with no community input. Other cities, like Kansas City, Missouri, enjoy a public art program that includes citizens from all stations of the community on the selection panels. This kind of “ownership” in public art promotes pride not only in the art but in the city as well.

## What Fuels Claims?

You have heard others say and you may have even said yourself, “I don’t know anything about art, but I know what I like!” I always wonder why people think it’s okay to claim they know nothing about something and then judge it, make decisions about it, spend money on it, and even try to persuade others about it. That doesn’t happen in “hard” disciplines like science and technology. If someone doesn’t know anything about technology, for instance, it is unlikely



**Figure 1.1** GEAR (Mark Schweiger), American (b. 1968). *Bade*. Spray paint, alley wall of 3 Axis, Kansas City, MO, 9 × 16 feet (approx.).

others will pay attention to what they think about technology. What fuels the passion people have for claiming to know nothing about art, and to know what they like? Perhaps it is some expressive quality like creativity, imagination, preference, or taste. Sometimes art is about something viewers don't know about or understand. Is taste, preference, imagination, creativity, or expression different or better if knowledge informs it? Here are a few stories about art, artists, and art audiences along with some questions about art issues that are complex and overlap. Some of the issues will be addressed in this chapter and others will be addressed in subsequent chapters in this book.

Does everyone have to “like” every work of public art? Is it even possible for every citizen to like every work of art, public or not? Do we need to know something about art to appreciate it? Is art a matter of preference, familiarity, and taste alone? Who decides what art is in the case of public art? Are criteria for art different when public funds are used?

Some people think appreciating art is a private affair that should be savored in silence. They believe it is a matter of personal preference or taste. This contributes to another over-used cliché, “beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” which attempts to give credibility to a solitary experience of art. Yet a significant part of cultural history includes art objects that have become enduring objects of public appreciation and been placed in locations for the largest public exposure. When art is experienced in public contexts, critical debates ensue because it is bound to conflict with someone's personal preference or taste. Critical thinking about art requires knowledge of visual form, content, and context. Art history, visual culture, and stories about what has preceded us in this place and this time are good places to start thinking critically about art.

Art has defined locations throughout history and has even become synonymous with places, cultures, and peoples, like the Parthenon in Athens, the Arch in St. Louis, the Eiffel Tower in Paris, and the *Clothespin* in Philadelphia, for instance. Even if some of it, like the Elgin Marbles from the Parthenon, now in the British Museum in London, remains only as architectural or sculptural fragments or images in paintings or photographs, these artworks and artifacts help us know cultural histories, ourselves, and people of other cultures as well.

### Unique Public Art

“Defend the professionalism of the process, the artist and the art,” exclaimed a message from a director of a city artists’ organization. “Support our municipal arts administrator as he defends Public Art.” More than one hundred members of the local art community – artists, art historians, art critics, art gallery directors and art museum curators, art administrators, interior designers, and architects – answered the call and showed their support by attending a standing-room-only, two-hour meeting in a City Hall on a hot and humid August day. This open city council meeting in a city with a model 1% for the arts program was called to discuss the approval of a competitive \$1 million public art commission.

The minutes of the meeting reported, “One council member spoke out against the style of art that had been presented to the council, not the artist. She was looking for something that would be unique” to the city.

The city council member who didn’t like the sculptures chosen for a prestigious downtown location said the piece was like her “red cocktail dress – not appropriate for business.” She had her own ideas about what “her” city should have on this site. She did not want to just “rubber stamp” her approval of a decision made by a municipal art commission selection panel. She requested this open city council meeting to discuss the matter and to try to persuade her fellow council members not to approve this particular public art installation.

A 19-member selection panel reviewed 156 formal proposals from artists during a 17-month-long process. The selection panel requested fully developed models and presentations from seven artists. After all the presentations and deliberations, the panel chose Jun Kaneko’s *Water Plaza* (2007), an installation of seven ceramic



**Figure 1.2** Jun Kaneko, *American* (b. Japan, 1949). *Water Plaza*, 2007.

sculptures on zigzag-patterned concrete. Kaneko is an internationally known artist with a studio in the neighboring state.

But this lone city council member didn't "like" Jun Kaneko's work. She thought it all looked the same and that it would not enhance the city to have work that could be found anywhere. "I want something unique to my city," she proclaimed.

During the meeting, almost every city council member prefaced their comments with statements like "I don't know anything about art," or "I know what I like, like everyone does," or "I don't know what it is, but it looks good to me." Male council members illustrated their rationale by holding up their neckties and declaring that their beauty was a credit to their wives, who had selected them.

The Director of the Municipal Art Commission explained to those who claimed not to know anything about art that the people from the art community who were in attendance at this meeting not only knew something about art, they "live art."

He further explained that this particular selection panel consisted of 15 voting and 4 advisory members, including art professionals,

architects, educators, and civic leaders who had engaged in the lengthy deliberation process. The city council was the final body in the process required to approve this \$1 million public art commission.

This open city council meeting began with remarks by the Municipal Art Commission Director, the Director of the City Arts Council, and one of the architects for the building project who was also an advisory member on the selection panel. Letters were read to the council from members of the art community who could not be present for the meeting. Jun Kaneko presented his process in developing *Water Plaza* for this specific site. Kaneko's presentation included an overview of his work along with photographs, drawings, and his preliminary research.

Near the end of two hours, audience members were allowed to make comments. An interior designer took the podium and explained that Jun Kaneko's work would bring international recognition to the city. She reminded the council, especially the dissenting council member, that seeing a Renoir painting in France and seeing one here would not make Renoir's work any less unique or valuable. Renoir's paintings are recognizable because of their style. She explained that other cities and other countries have Renoir paintings in public collections and there are Renoirs in personal art collections all over the world, including this city. These collections enhance the value of Renoir's work rather than rendering them less unique. Jun Kaneko is a contemporary artist. Perhaps, she suggested, the same criteria could be applied to historically recognized artists and their styles as to the works of art created in the twenty-first century? Or does art have to be old before it becomes valuable?

A year after this hearing, the visual art critic for the *Kansas City Star* reported, "For the fifth time in a decade, a Kansas City public artwork has been singled out in the 'Public Art in Review' section of *Art in America* magazine's annual guide to museums, galleries and artists" (Thorson 2008). The distinction went to Kaneko's *Water Plaza*, which was one of 21 public artworks across the United States featured in the August 2008 guide. Kaneko's million-dollar project was commissioned under the city's 1 percent for art program, which sets aside 1 percent of public costs of civic building construction, explained the *Kansas City Star* article. "This tribute reflects our standing in the national public art landscape and reaffirms the significance of the arts in our region," said Porter Arneill, Director of the Kansas City Missouri Municipal Art Commission.

## Public Art

Since the mid-sixties, public art has enjoyed growth, support, and acceptance throughout the United States, a latecomer in the history of art with world attention only since the 1950s. Local businesses and national corporations joined with federal and state and city governments in championing the case of new accessible art for the public. Both government and business recognized the need to make high-quality public works of art available to many people in various geographic locations.

Kansas City's public art exemplifies a growing public interest in the arts with governmental and corporate responsiveness. It is acquired not only through its 1 percent for the arts program, which is common to many cities, but also through Avenue of the Arts, a unique private–public partnership that showcases a wide range of innovative art in downtown Kansas City that provides new opportunities for local artists.

In January 2009 “More Public Displays for Artworks” appeared in the *Kansas City Star's* Arts Section and described more than a dozen of the artworks Porter Arneill had presided over since he took charge, in 2002, of the city's 1 percent for the arts program (Thorson 2009): from a series of elevated parking control arms activated by road-mounted sensors, called *Seven Sentinels* (2008), located at the City Vehicle Impound Facility by Kansas City artist Matt Dehaemers, to *Inheritance* (2008), a five-part piece featuring maps and interactive artworks that explore the theme of community for the Southeast Community Center by Kansas City husband and wife team Julia Cole and Leigh Rosser, to *Red Eye* (2009), the East Village Parking Facility featuring mixed-media panels by California artist Gordon Huether. Public Art in Kansas City features local as well as international artists like Jun Kaneko, Alice Aycock, Joel Shapiro, Deborah Butterfield, Terry Allen, and Robert Morris.

Public art programs in the United States had their beginnings as a key component of social programs in the 1930s. Some of the greatest American artists emerged during that time and their creations included murals in schools, post offices, and government buildings, sculptures, photographs, urban park systems, and public monuments, as well as community theatre, educational programs, and writing projects. Public artworks changed the American landscape. This American heritage was evidenced in the 2009 inaugural celebrations, which included different styles of music, poetry, speeches, and sermons in honor of the new American President, Barack Obama, who is a writer, orator, and supporter of the arts.

## The National Endowment for the Arts and the Art in Public Places Program

The United States Federal Government funds the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). It was organized in the 1960s and initiated the Art in Public Places Program. The process of funding art for Art in Public Places sought to avoid imposing a governmental “Big Brother” approach to art selections that gave the community little say in a selection process and alienated the citizenry and instead supported requests for public funding for the arts that came directly from the community.

The first commission for a major sculptural work for a specific site was in 1966, when Grand Rapids, Michigan, requested NEA funds for Alexander Calder’s *La Grande Vitesse*, a huge monochrome, abstract sculpture slated for the floundering city’s downtown plaza. This was an excellent example of public art, the NEA thought, because the work was by a renowned artist who engaged the community’s imagination in a variety of ways. Urban renewalists liked the increased support the sculpture lent to their rebuilding efforts, social activists and cultural leaders envisioned the plaza and sculpture to be a staging ground for open-air theatre, fairs, and concerts, townspeople enjoyed the national recognition and sense of pride their city gained from the extensive publicity, and resident artists saw the sculpture as a symbol of deliverance from the aesthetically unenlightened views of the “locals.” The sculpture, because of its abstractness, could be interpreted in a variety of ways, engaging viewers and inviting them to enjoy it in new ways each time they viewed it.

The importance of *La Grande Vitesse* in obtaining national recognition for the city turned President Ford, a Michigan native, into a staunch supporter of the Art in Public Places Program. Years later, Ford said he didn’t even know what a Calder was at the time. He was not alone. For many years Grand Rapids residents asked, in all honesty, “Who was the artist who made the Calder?” President Ford assured members of Congress that “A Calder in the center of an urban redevelopment area helped regenerate a city.”

Of course the recognition Grand Rapids earned from Calder’s sculpture was not without controversy. Even though the city was revitalized and official stationery and street signs with the Calder image publicized the city’s pride in the Calder sculpture, public debate of the age-old argument ensued: “They spent my tax dollars on that?” This kind of lively controversy provided an opportunity for a community to examine its goals and priorities. In this way, public art avoids the detached realm of classical aesthetics and enters the real world of social issues and debate.

Even into the NEA's second decade, after its significant impact on communities all over the country, there were questions regarding the use of public money for art. Were only "elitist" artists or institutions being funded? Had the outreach policy resulted in a lessening the "quality" of supported art programs? Pleasing the diverse constituency that exists in America is an impossible task. Unlike medical research, national defense, and the space program, public arts programs have earned much less support in terms of both importance and funding.

Public sculptures with particularly difficult histories include Mark Di Suvero's installation in Grand Rapids, *Motu Vigel (Tire Swing)* (1977), which changed into a radically different artwork from the originally proposed piece. The piece not only met with dismay and disappointment, it led to what the government deemed as a breach of contract. The dispute was clouded and complex with the execution of contracts, international exhibitions, private funds, and community petitions. It resulted in new understandings of what is required of artists, government, and the private sector.

"I don't know anything about art, but I know what I like!" is heard as a defense for not knowing the "esoteric" or "mysterious" qualities of art, and being in a situation where an opinion about art is required. It is often an excuse for what comments will be coming next. It is used to dismiss important matters in art as being unimportant. Everyone has a right to their own taste and their own decisions about what art they like and don't like, what art they place in their homes, what clothes or jewelry or body piercing or markings they prefer, but what about when the art is public art?

Unfortunately, the National Endowment for the Arts became mired in politics on the national level during the 1990s when Senator Jesse Helms' wife saw a catalog from the exhibition called *The Perfect Moment* (1988–9) by photographer Robert Mapplethorpe. She was offended by the homoerotic images and thought the work was immoral. Mrs. Helms asked her husband to do something about Mapplethorpe's pictures. The film *Dirty Pictures* (2000) is a dramatization of issues, aesthetic, social, and human, that can manifest themselves during controversies sparked by the arts. More than ten years of social and political battles ensued that drastically cut the National Endowment for the Arts, the smallest of the federal budgets. The NEA added new stipulations to awards to individual artists and eventually eliminated awards to individual artists. Artists who were awarded NEA grants refused the money because they felt the new restrictions violated their artistic freedom and integrity.

These "Culture Wars," as they came to be called, found their way to art museums and galleries, universities, and even to Hollywood. The "cultural



elite” who supported the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution and artistic freedom were pitted against the “moral majority” right-wing conservative government. It was an ugly period in U.S. cultural history that is slowly healing through awareness and experience of the benefits of supporting the arts. Interestingly, there is a movement requesting the President of the United States to create a Secretary of the Arts, equivalent to Ministers of Culture in other countries.

### **Another Public Art “Problem”**

World-renowned artist Richard Serra created a different kind of public art problem with his sculpture *Tilted Arc* (1981). Serra’s piece, which was installed in the Plaza of the Jacob Javits Federal Building in lower Manhattan in New York City, was, like the Jun Kaneko installation in Kansas City, chosen by a group of government and community members. All members of the selection committee approved the model of the sculpture. A contract was issued. Serra built and installed the sculpture on the Plaza. But the people who worked and used the Plaza of the Federal Building didn’t like *Tilted Arc* and they complained. A hearing was conducted and it was decided to remove the sculpture.

Site-specific sculpture is made for a specific space, a specific location. *Tilted Arc* was a site-specific sculpture that would lose its aesthetic value when removed from the site for which it was created. *Tilted Arc* was designed specifically for the Plaza. It would not be art if it was not in this specific site because the element of space and location, and, in this case, dislocation, would be destroyed. Removing the sculpture, which is ultimately what happened, is an example of people who don’t always know much about art, but who felt strongly about not liking the way *Tilted Arc* changed their space. They did not like the feeling of dislocation that Serra had successfully created and they strongly objected to having to live with it. They wanted their familiar Plaza back and they were successful in reclaiming it by exercising opportunities for debate and discussion.

### **Public Art Collaborative Artist Teams**

There are two prolific, and often controversial, husband and wife collaborative teams who have made major contributions to outdoor art for the public around the world. Both couples are as different in their content,

process, and approaches as in the controversies that surround their work. Christo and Jeanne-Claude (Jeanne-Claude died in November, 2009) have used various materials to “wrap” islands off the coast of Florida, the Reichstag in Berlin, the Pont Neuf in Paris, and the coast of Little Bay in Sydney, Australia. In 2005 they created 7,503 saffron-colored fabric *Gates* in Central Park in New York City. Their works are deliberately temporary. The Central Park *Gates* were up for only 16 days. Christo and Jeanne-Claude do not accept government or corporate funds and that takes them out of the public money debate but does not exclude them from the aesthetic debates about the artworks themselves. They fund all their own projects by selling original drawings and sketches, books, and videos, even postcards with bits of former installations, like the piece I bought at the Ludwig Forum in Aachen, Germany. Even though their art is not created with public money, it is art for the public and has been enjoyed, discussed, and debated all over the world. The content of their work is about experience, public debate, and discussion. Their art is as much about social comment as it is about the visual forms and experiences they create. Comprehension of their work would include knowledge about visual art elements as well as aesthetic issues and political processes both public and private.

Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen (van Bruggen died in January 2009) are another remarkable collaborative artist team. They re-create objects from everyday life in a playful way on a gargantuan scale. Like the Calder in Grand Rapids, Oldenburg and van Bruggen created huge sculptures that were controversial at first and after awhile were embraced and even laid claim as defining the place: for instance, their 45 foot tall *Clothespin* (1976) in Philadelphia, and 96 foot tall *Batcolumn* (1977) in Chicago, or their giant *Trowel I* (1971–6) in the Rijksmuseum, Kröller Müller Otterlo, the Netherlands and *Trowel II* (1984) in New York, and the four 18 foot tall *Shuttlecocks* on the lawns of the Nelson-Atkins Museum in Kansas City.

The collaboration between Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen shows their strong and distinct identities. Their dialogue, articulated in an exchange of words and images, dramatically addresses the complexity of the contemporary world. Oldenburg and van Bruggen think about culture, landscape, and architecture and work playfully with everyday objects. Their approach to art in the urban context goes beyond the security of museum walls. They work on large-scale projects, creating public works for cities in Europe, America, and Asia. Every project is developed through a dialogue of sketches, drawings, studies, and models. Both teams, Christo and Jeanne-Claude and Oldenburg and van Bruggen, document their ideas, which are in continual



**Figure 1.3** Claes Oldenburg, American (b. Sweden, 1929) and Coosje van Bruggen, American (b. The Netherlands, 1942–2009). *Shuttlecocks* (one of four), 1994. Aluminum, fiberglass-reinforced plastic, paint, h × diam.: 230<sup>5</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 191<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches.

transition. These are all elements of creativity: flexibility, developing alternatives, continuing transitions from idea to idea. Like the largest public project, the smallest drawing on a scrap of paper represents an in-depth analysis of the form and content that characterizes artists' explorations. Oldenburg and van Bruggen reflect on human fragility and the microcosm of events that define daily life; Christo and Jeanne-Claude add the nature of social and political order to the dialogue; and both artist couples reveal their ability to communicate values that transcend linguistic and cultural barriers.

### Contributions to Aesthetic Value

Terms used in describing these events, the art, and the artists include art knowledge, creativity, imagination, preference, taste, and judgment. From a theoretical point of view, creating public art is rather an oxymoron. Art is generally taken to be an individual endeavor, an act of expression or imagination specific to the artist. The descriptions of the form, process, and

content of artworks by Richard Serra, Jun Kaneko, Christo and Jeanne-Claude, and Oldenburg and van Bruggen contribute to an understanding of the aesthetic and artistic values with which artists imbue their art objects. Kaneko's work is mysterious and equivocal, controlled and commanding, with both Eastern and Western values that are unchanging, thriving, and intellectual, as well as good humored, skillful, and revolutionary (Capital Improvements Management Office 2009). Oldenburg and van Bruggen reflect on human fragility and events that define daily life. Christo and Jeanne-Claude work with the nature of social and political order. It seems all of these artists communicate their specific knowledge about art in the works they create. Their artistic values transcend linguistic and cultural barriers.

### *Cultural values, creativity, and imagination*

In terms of public art, however, additional values come into play. Public art addresses a place and a time in a way that an artwork in a museum does not. Public art, these days, demands the participation of the viewer – participation not only in terms of engaging with the object but in terms of engaging the environment, both physical and cultural, in which the artwork is situated. Public art is a creative study of the space and the time in which it exists, and the viewer is invited to think about that. Artists are keenly aware of the specific site in which their sculpture will be placed. Note the extensive proposal Jun Kaneko developed for Kansas City and the drawings, plans, and sketches made by Oldenburg and van Bruggen after visiting sites before creating a work, or the very deliberate selection of location and time-consuming permissions process that Christo and Jeanne-Claude engage in so their content, meaning, and message can be part of the viewer's conscious or subconscious participation.

Public art counts on public engagement. Artists who make art for the public are acutely aware of the different kind of audience participation that public work demands as opposed to work for sale to individuals or on display in museums. While knowledge, creativity, and imagination of the artist are essential components of any artwork, the knowledge, imagination, creativity, preference, judgment, and taste of the audience are also factors in public art.

### *Preference and taste*

Audiences factor their own comfort levels into their preferences and taste. Psychologists tell us we are comfortable with the familiar and artists know audiences will like something on the same order of what they grew up with

or what they have seen before and may take that into consideration. If artists try to take their creativity and imagination beyond public preference, taste, and comfort, problems can arise. The same applies if audiences are unwilling to take some time to take up new ideas, creativity, and imagination.

### *Critical judgment*

Audiences don't always make the distinction between what they like and their judgment of the quality of an artwork. Often, preference or taste and judgment are confused. If we like something, we think it is good, and if we don't like it, we think it is bad. Good and bad are judgments. A judgment is an informed decision based on knowledge of the subject. Liking or not liking is preference or taste. Taste or preference, liking or not liking something, does not have to be defended. Art in our private lives can be about what we like. After all, why would we place something we don't enjoy in our home? If we wanted to publish an art review or register our judgment about an artwork in a public arena, we would be making a judgment and judgments must be defended. Art knowledge is a good way to defend a position about art.

### *Art knowledge*

Knowledge of art theories and ideas provides the strength of support you want for your arguments about these art issues and, if you are an artist, for developing your own philosophy for art making. (Artists write artists' statements to help viewers understand how their work has been influenced by concrete and conceptual ideas, and defend their statements with art knowledge.)

In the case of Jun Kaneko's public art installation in Kansas City, does it help to know that Jun Kaneko was born in Nagoya, Japan, where he studied painting before he came to the United States and turned his focus to sculptural ceramics? Or that he studied with Peter Voulkos and Paul Soldner in California, who defined the contemporary ceramics movement? Or that he has a prolific roster of work appearing in international exhibitions in more than 40 museum collections including the Smithsonian American Art Museum? Or that he executed over 25 public art commissions in Europe and Japan as well as the United States? Or that he established a third studio in Omaha, Nebraska, where he primarily works?

Jun Kaneko creates large-scale sculptures, including his series of large "Dango" ("dumpling" or "closed form" in Japanese) ceramic pieces resembling vases without openings. His work is "unrivaled in the field of ceramic art,"

said his former teacher and legendary ceramics sculptor and influential artist, Peter Voulkos. “His technical achievements alone have redefined the possibilities the medium has to offer. His ceramic works are an amazing synthesis of painting and sculpture.” They are “enigmatic and elusive, simultaneously restrained and powerful, Eastern and Western, static and alive, intellectual and playful, technical and innovative” (Ceramics Today n.d.).

### Additional Points to Consider

There are several issues embedded in these events, such as people not feeling confident talking about art and being afraid to acknowledge there might be something to know about it that they don't know, “I don't know anything about art ...” The issue about what is beautiful and what has cultural significance and who gets to decide what art is are all embedded in public art examples. Certainly the issue of preference and taste and the question of originals and style and “uniqueness” are part of the events described in this and other chapters in this book.

Some observers of public art deliberations wonder why, if a city's council members didn't know anything about art, they were deliberating about it and making decisions about it. Some wondered why council members didn't try to learn something about art before the meeting. In the end, the Kansas City, Missouri, City Council spoke out in behalf of the selection process used to choose the artist for this specific project and approved the decision of a selection panel who made it their business to know something about art.