

**THE TILTED TRAJECTORY OF PUBLIC ART: NEW YORK CITY 1979 – 2005**

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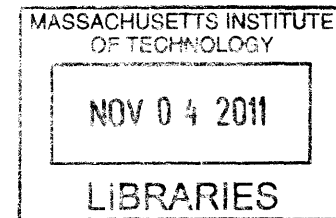
**ARCHIVES**

**Submitted to the Department of Urban Studies and Planning in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of**

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### ABSTRACT

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This thesis explores the relationship between urban planning and public art, and questions the efficacy of past and current models, whilst pushing us to develop new ones. It strives to glean the most salient issues universal to all instances of public art, and uses four case studies to illuminate such issues in practice. *Tilted Arc* by Richard Serra and *Metronome* by Jones and Ginzel adhere to a conventional model of public art – an object in a public space, commissioned by a small group of “experts,” with an essentially passive role accorded to audience. *The Gates* and the work of artist *Mierle Laderman Ukeles* emphasize ephemerality, integration and participation. While vastly different from one another, the latter two also strive to engage more directly with urban planning and political processes. *Tilted Arc* is *the* watershed public artwork, and sets the stage upon which the other three case studies unfold. Within the context of New York City’s neoliberal transformation, this thesis seeks to situate public art’s role in the process, capping the story with *The Gates* in 2005.

With modernist notions of public art losing relevance, this thesis argues that unrealistic expectations are still all-too-often placed on public art, using vestigial notions of the relationship between artist and audience. Simultaneously such outdated ideas undermine the potential for us as urban planners and public art producers to find new ways of working together in the service of cities that are “revitalized, cosmopolitan, just and democratic.”<sup>1</sup> Instead this thesis argues that we deconstruct concepts of form, process, and audience/intention, and reconstitute new models for public art in our cities. Optimistically I argue that such thinking is already underway in cities like New York. It is fundamental that we consider how to refine and consolidate what is working for public art, and integrate such aspects into urban planning and policy from the outset. With both public art and urban planning at a crossroads, the potential exists to think and act boldly as we move forward. Professional silos need to be regularly challenged – collaboration will be the most important ingredient needed to redefine and shape the trajectory of public art in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Thesis Supervisor:** Brent D. Ryan, M.I.T.

**Thesis Reader:** Patricia C. Phillips, R.I.S.D.

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<sup>1</sup> Fainstein, “Can we make the cities we want?”

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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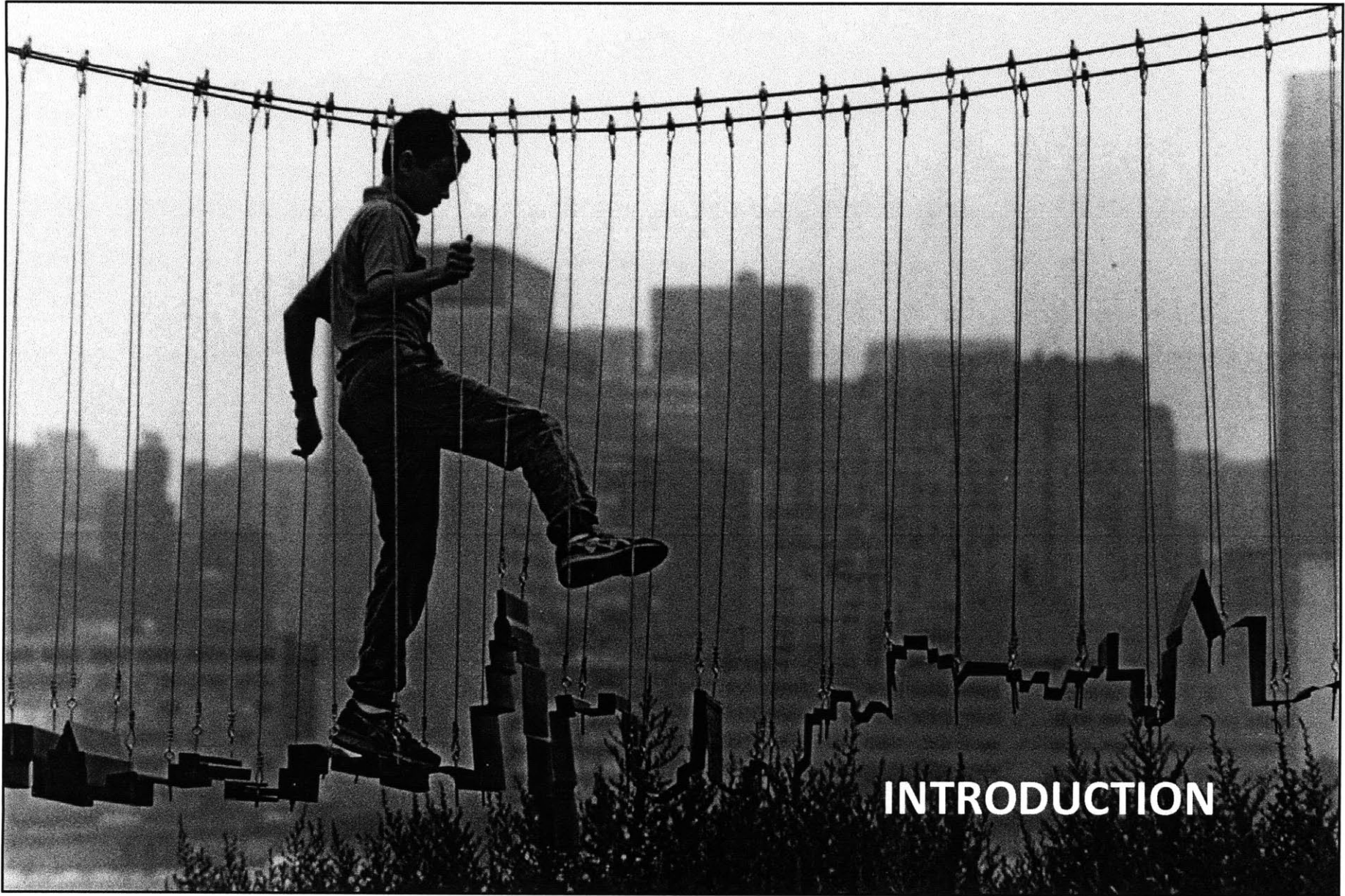
To the irreverent DUSP students John Arroyo, Cassim Shepard, Linda Ciesielski and Christina Markel who believe in urban planning's wide applicability and varied interpretative qualities, thank you for applying your creativity and intellect to producing new possibilities and directions for the field. Thank you to my supervisor Brent Ryan for your patience and interdisciplinary intelligence, and to my readers Patricia C. Phillips at R.I.S.D. and Andres Sevstuk at M.I.T. for your insight and encouragement of this thesis' ideas. To my interviewees – Charlotte Cohen at the GSA, Richard Griggs at the Public Art Fund, Tom Eccles former director of the Public Art Fund (now at Bard), Liesel Fenner at Americans for the Arts, Glenn Weiss at Art Times Square (Times Square Alliance), Tom Finkelppearl at the Queens Museum of Art, Gavin Kroeber and Meredith Johnson at Creative Time, Harriet Senie at CUNY (and *Tilted Arc* scholar), Mierle Laderman Ukeles the virtuoso ahead of her time, Dale Lanzzone at Marlborough Gallery (formerly at GSA), Christine Gaspar at the Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP), Erin Donnelly and Andy Horwitz at the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council (LMCC), Lauren Ross at the High Line, Wendy Feuer and Emily Colasacco at the Department of Transportation (DOT), and Susan Chin at the NYC Department of Cultural Affairs – your words form the heart of this thesis, thank you.

To my family and friends, and most especially to my husband Francis, thank you for your support and love through what has at times been a challenging experience. Thank you for encouraging me to continue and to be patient (it's a marathon, not a sprint), and for believing that I have something to say, and that it's worth saying.

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**INTRODUCTION**

*“The strange power of art is that sometimes it can show that what people have in common is more urgent than what differentiates them.” John Berger*

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Art and urbanism are long-time cohorts, but in the middle of the twentieth century the ambitions of art in the public realm started to multiply and diversify. As Hilde Hein wrote: “The monolithic cultural assumptions implicit in Roman forum statuary or an altar triptych or even the typical town square equestrian statue are no longer viable.”<sup>2</sup> Instead, public art has been heralded as urban savior, catalyzing the redevelopment and beautification of cities in the face of economic decline; urban engager, uniting diverse communities under a shared creative purpose; and urban attractor, luring people and capital in the face of a competitive, global and newly neoliberal marketplace.

As Sara Selwood puts it: “Expansive claims are made for public art.”<sup>3</sup> Yet public art and urban planning are still working at a

**Figure 1: *Art on the Beach 8, Creative Time (1987)***  
Image [www.creativetime.org](http://www.creativetime.org)

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<sup>2</sup> Hein, “What Is Public Art?”.

<sup>3</sup> Selwood, *The Benefits of Public Art in Britain*.

remove from each other. I believe that we are in the midst of a transitional moment for both fields, a new and exciting period in which both are being increasingly recognized for their value and potential to create cities that are “revitalized, cosmopolitan, just and democratic.”<sup>4</sup> But in order to do so more profoundly, public art and urban planning will need to strive to work together more effectively and comprehensively in the years ahead.

The central argument for this thesis is not an argument for more public art, nor is it a claim that public art can save declining cities. If anything the expectations placed on public art are so utopian as to be regularly unrealizable, reinforcing a persistent disappointment that lingers in the cultural ether about art in the public sphere.<sup>5</sup> What I am interested in is the possibility that there is a third “space” in between urban planning and public art, one more activated now that both fields are so hard to define, and one within which new visions of the city might be not only highly desirable, but also practicable.

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<sup>4</sup> Fainstein, “Can we make the cities we want?”.

<sup>5</sup> Malcolm Miles describes “most Utopias (as) authoritarian in the brittleness of control they require to maintain their stasis.”

The alchemy between the seemingly regulatory, line-drawing nature of urban planning and the provocative and rule-bending role traditionally assigned to art-making suggests the possibility of contributing to the democratic ideal: a commons wherein multiple voices speak and are valued. If public art and urban planning professionals are willing to work together in new and experimental ways (creative thinking isn't the exclusive domain of artists), then I believe we will be one step closer to making cities within which "social benefits are primary," and alternative urban models are constantly emerging.<sup>6</sup> My research lies somewhere in between legitimizing public art and problematizing it.

Urban planning and public art share some of the same challenges in their efforts to work within, upon and in the service of, cities and their citizens. Within my thesis is the argument that most public art has the potential to be more impactful, ought to be valued in ways beyond the decorative, and needs to be given license to be pervasive, provocative when necessary, and unpredictable. I think urban planning should be allowed to do the

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<sup>6</sup> Miles, *Art, Space and the City*.

same, and can take the lead from some of the leading producers of public art in cities nationwide, particularly in New York City.

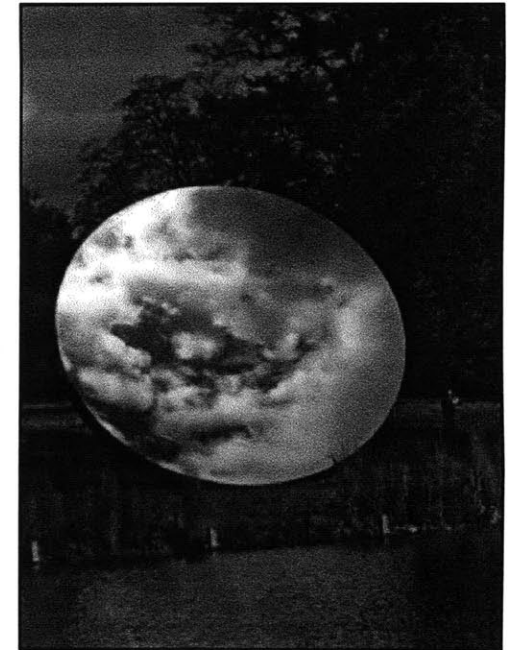
Public art and urban planning need to do more than be the handmaiden of capitalism.

Together they have the potential to reconstitute dynamic civic arenas, ones in which shopping isn't the main

form of shared public experience.<sup>7</sup> Public art

producers and artists working

in the public sphere are thinking progressively and creatively, and their contributions need to be nurtured by city processes, not mired in their bureaucracy. Both sides need to be better educated



**Figure 2: Anish Kapoor *Sky Mirror* in London's Hyde Park (2001)**

**Image courtesy Gaius Cornelius**

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<sup>7</sup> Rem Koolhaas (et al) argue that shopping is the last truly public shared activity in Chung et al., *The Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping / Harvard Design School Project on the City 2*.



and included at every step, while everyone needs to be relieved of the pressure to please every possible audience, every single time.

## CASE STUDIES

I have chosen four case studies that, taken as a whole, reflect many of public art's most persistent and salient issues. In light of their marked differences – namely formal, contextual (both geographic and sociopolitical), and administrative – the priority has been to take each case and make inquiries about it individually, rather than striving for some sort of (potentially impossible) analytic synthesis at the end.

Producers vary from the artists themselves, to private developers, to some combination of nonprofit and/or City funding. Some are more generalizable to a certain kind of public art (there have been many similar projects), while others are exemplary and incomparable. Nevertheless what I believe the projects share, both historically and conceptually, is that each one marks an important moment when public art was changing within art historical discourse as well as in terms of its relationship to its urban context.

Contrary to popular myth, most public art is not controversial. My case studies reflect his little-acknowledged truth, though all four have received more attention than most. They have been subject to varied responses, professionally, institutionally and/or by the “public.” Some have been deemed successes and others, failures; most have been called both and it depends on whom one asks. Much as normative public art definitions are hard to come by, so too are evaluations and significant measures of reception or impact. Quantifying public art is challenging, and the most prominent efforts so far have been for the sake of economics. In any case, public art has struggled with the “art for art’s sake” argument, and lost.

While a Birdseye glimpse will be given of the larger history of public art and urban planning in the USA, the context of this thesis is New York City circa 1979 - 2005. An epicenter that has experienced rapid urban development and an image-makeover in the last twenty-five years, New York City has gone from a city associated with civil unrest, fiscal insolvency, and soaring crime in the 1970s and 80s to one filled with chain stores, trendy

restaurants and high rents in 2010. New York “ascendant”<sup>8</sup> is *the* model for late capitalist redevelopment across the globe. It is also the arts and culture capital of the United States. The role of mayor in New York is significant, more so than in most other cities. In the course of four administrations from 1978 to 2010, three provide the context within which I have situated public art: Ed Koch (1978-1989), Rudy Giuliani (1994-2001) and Michael Bloomberg (2001 – present).<sup>9</sup> In many ways New York City is such an exceptional case that it is risky to extrapolate analysis beyond its borders. Still the city has had to wrestle with the effects of redevelopment in its own unique way, and as either precedent or juxtapositional case, I would argue that it offers a robust set of clues about public art, and why it’s vital.

*Tilted Arc*, Richard Serra’s monolithic abstract work for the General Services Administration (GSA) in Federal Plaza, is *the* watershed case in the history of public art. It changed the course of public art forever, and crystallized many of the tensions of the time period, the 1980s. In a way *Tilted Arc* serves as an

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<sup>8</sup> Zukin, *Naked City*.

<sup>9</sup> David Dinkins lasted from 1990 to 1993 and was ousted for Giuliani as the perception that crime was out of control, grew.

antithetical case study. It engaged very little, at least directly, with urban planning and/or City bureaucracy. The site is federal property, and as such has a curious relationship with the local community. Harriet Senie, who has written several texts about the *Tilted Arc* story asked rhetorically in my interview with her: “Why are people *still* talking about *Tilted Arc*? Why can’t we move on?” I aim to understand not only how the work operated within public policy, but also to uncover what it is about this case that remains so captivating.

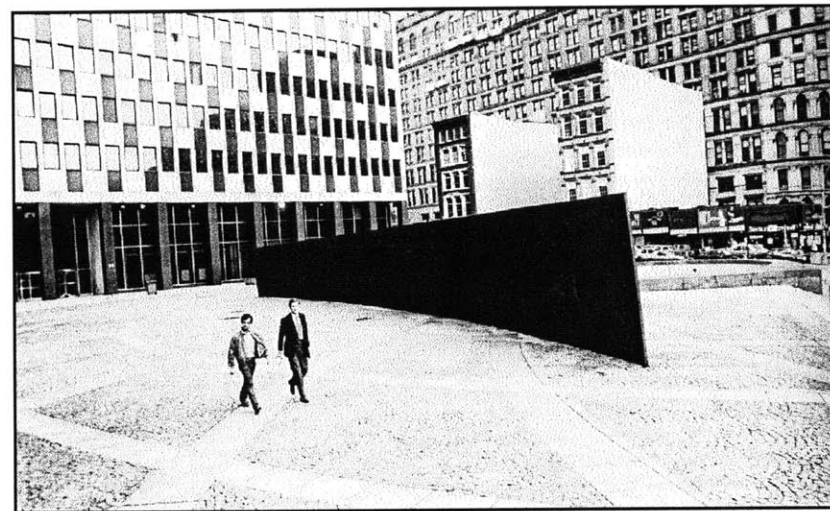


Figure 3: *Tilted Arc*, Image from Senie 2001.

Senie rightly pointed out that *Tilted Arc* is unlike any other project and as such is difficult (she used the word impossible) to extrapolate from. Yet as *Tilted Arc* has permeated public art discourse and the history of lower Manhattan's built environment to such an extent (and to reiterate Senie's comment, it continues to be brought up in conversation), I believe that it still holds implications for urban policy and planning, more than twenty years later.

The second case study is the work of **Mierle Laderman Ukeles** within New York City's Department of Sanitation. In the 1960s, in rebellion against the dominant modes Ukeles saw prevailing in the art world, as well as frustration with the ways in which, as a new mother, she found herself expected to bifurcate her role as artist and caregiver, Ukeles broke from mainstream object-oriented practice and committed herself to working in a new way. She wrote a manifesto about her decision to become a "maintenance artist" in 1969, and in so doing declared her intention that art could be about the "doing" of chores and other actions, as opposed to the creation of some "thing."

*Touch Sanitation* was Ukeles first official project with the DOS (now the DSNY), and was a direct collaboration with 8,500 workers within the organization. She spent eleven months seeking to "face and shake hands" with every single worker while saying the words: "Thank you for keeping New York City alive." *Touch Sanitation* is one of a small handful of Ukeles projects that I will use to illustrate her innovative art processes and direct relationship with urban planning; for Ukeles, I will argue, her art is urban planning.



**Figure 4: Ukeles' *Touch Sanitation* (1984).**

**Image *Dispossessed Installations* 1992.**

Third is *Metronome*, a project commissioned by private developer The Related Companies, and installed on a building on the southern side of Union Square in 1999. *Metronome* cost \$3 million, making it one of the most expensive private commissions of public art in the world. Critics have pretty much uniformly berated and loathed the project, and it has topped several popular opinion lists in the vein of “buildings we love to hate.” The ostensible failure of this project is always blamed on the artists, and focused on aesthetics. Perhaps the more interesting question to ask is how and why did it fail? How could a proposal that was vetted through a competition with over two hundred entries, shortlisted and continually deliberated upon, “not work”? Public Art Fund, one of New York’s most prolific and well-respected public art nonprofits, was hired to design the national competition. The Municipal Arts Society (MAS), the watchdog for the city’s built environment, was also involved in the process. *Metronome* is the only project (of the four case studies) that still exists as a permanent work in the city, and yet it has received the least positive attention. Is it possible that this model of public art has exhausted its relevance in contemporary culture?



Figure 5: *Metronome*, Union Square. Image LeBon 2000.



Figure 6: *The Gates*, Central Park. Image Christo and Jean-Claude 2005.

Finally, Jeanne-Claude and Christo's *The Gates* for Central Park lasted sixteen days in February 2005. The couple is known for their prolonged battles to create projects like wrapping in fabric the Reichstag in Berlin, or the Pont Neuf in Paris, among many others. The duo was always explicit that their body of work was created through the consistent selection of sites whose execution would be challenging in the face of bureaucracy and other conservative rules and processes. *The Gates* took twenty-six years to come to fruition.

As a result, the project was a strange mixture of an old aesthetic in a changed context. In some ways the final product is as modernist as Serra's *Tilted Arc*, but the emphasis on process in *The Gates* differentiates it. *The Gates* were privately funded (by the artists themselves in fact – to the tune of \$21 million), and always intended to be temporary. The saffron-colored flags transformed and reconfigured the park, and attracted thousands of residents and tourists in an otherwise bleak February to the city. As Tom Finkelpearl remarked in my interview with him: "It was a healing moment for the city after 9/11. It's like if your mom got shot and then five years later you threw a fantastic party to celebrate your

father's birthday."<sup>10</sup> Also, the economic success of *The Gates* opened the doors even wider for public art, and reinforced the idea held for decades in urban and cultural policy that public art can regenerate cities and make money.

## RESEARCH SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

This thesis ties together two fields whose broad applicability means that the options for methodology and framing literature are vast. As such I have developed three consistent, guiding questions:

- I. How can the history of public art be situated within the histories of urban planning and architecture, and how has this affected both its application and perceived relevance, specifically with regards to the built environment?
- II. Public art has unique potential, but have the expectations placed upon it been, paradoxically, both unrealizably high and too limited in scope?

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with Tom Finkelpearl, Director of the Queens Museum of Art (11/05/2010).

- III. Art in the public sphere has a great deal to contribute to a democratic, socially just and ideologically robust (diverse) society. Thus how can and should this inform and be nurtured within urban planning processes going forward?

Each case study sheds light on one or more of these claims/questions. My hope is that, taken as a whole, the cases offer a cross-section of examples that ultimately support this thesis' ultimate claim: public art has a short and so far convoluted history, but the time has come for its unique potential to be re-evaluated and utilized in new ways as a powerful force in the shaping of 21<sup>st</sup> century cities.

## CHAPTER OVERVIEW

I have organized this thesis semi-chronologically, both within chapters and as a whole. The next chapter, Chapter II, gives a broad historical overview of public art's evolution within which all case studies are situated. I have focused on its history from the perspective of urban planning, but also given an explanation of its relation to art historical discourse, as the tensions of the latter have affected the ways in which it relates to the former. In other

words, public art projects differ in their allegiances and responsibilities. Some public art projects are more of a conversation with the “art world,” whereas others aspire to communicate with a broader and likely amateur, audience; some, I suppose, try to do both.

Chapters III, IV, V and VI are devoted one to each case study: *Tilted Arc*, *Mierle Laderman Ukeles*, *Metronome* and *The Gates*. For each case study I include its story and situate it within its broader context. I then include individual analysis of each case, attempting to address the questions I have raised and comparing the case more or less to the other three public art works in question. Finally, Chapter VI is a series of reflections and considerations of how to bring together the four case studies into a meaningful whole. In other words, what is the significance of the case studies when examined individually and in comparison to one another, and what might the implications be for urban planning as we continue seeking the best ways to evolve public art.

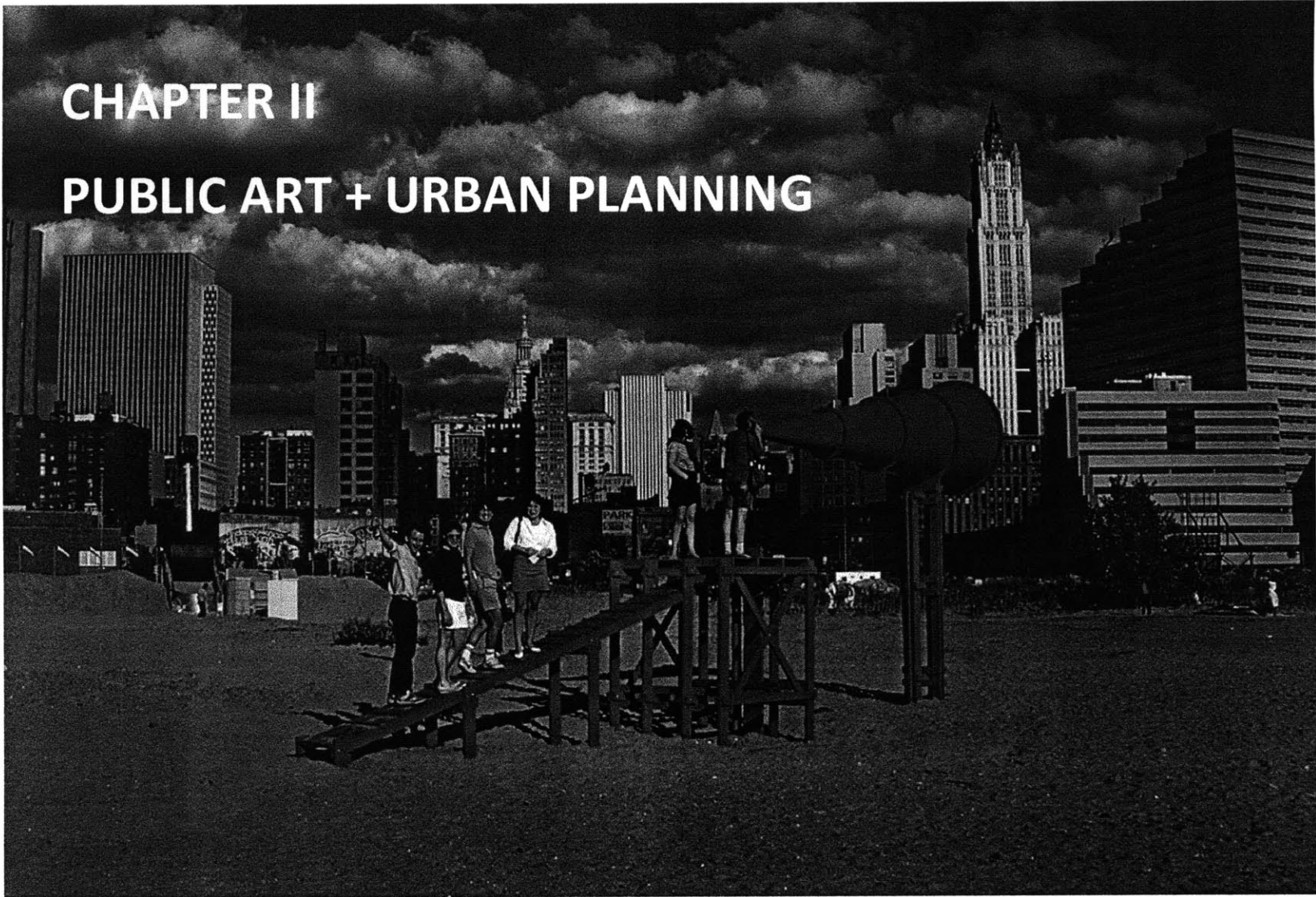


**Figure 7: Creative Time installation at Art Basel Miami (2010).**

**Image [www.creativetime.org](http://www.creativetime.org)**

## CHAPTER II

# PUBLIC ART + URBAN PLANNING





I begin by seeking to intertwine the histories of public art and urban planning in order to show how two fields that began as closely aligned, are now separate in almost every way but administratively. Both are relatively new concepts, and both have been changing rapidly in the last fifty to sixty years. In some instances, their trajectories seem in tandem while at other times, they are at odds. The same can be said for public art within art historical discourse: at times they can be read as separate fields entirely. The tension created by such fluctuations is what gives public art its vitality. A definitive history of either is of course impossible, but I have sought to include the central issues that have contributed to the development of both fields.

## BEGINNINGS: THEN

In 1889, Austrian architect and planning theorist Camillo Sitte wrote the book *City Planning According to Artistic Principles*, which proved so popular as to be edited five times between 1889 and 1922.<sup>11</sup> In the book Sitte argued for the importance of the quality of the aesthetic whole over the sum of its architectural parts. He

**Figure 8: *Art on the Beach 6, Creative Time 1984.***  
**image [www.creativetime.org](http://www.creativetime.org)**

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<sup>11</sup> Collins, Collins, and Sitte, *Camillo Sitte*.

lambasted the rationality of urban planning principles that created cities that emphasized order over formal beauty.

Becoming popular at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the related City Beautiful movement sought to use monuments and celebratory gestures such as World's Fairs to promote civic grandeur and American industrial optimism. The Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago, under the direction of architect and planner Daniel Burnham and landscape architect F.L. Olmsted, is a well-known example of the "city as a work of art"<sup>12</sup> model – urban life as a conspicuous spectacle. The architectural style of the period was predominantly Beaux-Arts, and the movement is an early sign of the faith of "renewal" by clearing and re-building.

Dale Lanzone<sup>13</sup> attributed the widespread and continued support for the art produced in this period, as: "fueled by the resonance of commonly understood figurative sculptural narratives," and a result of the fact that it: "idealized and affirmed the officially supported social, economic, and political doctrines of the time."<sup>14</sup> Public art no

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<sup>12</sup> Olsen, *The City as a Work of Art*.

<sup>13</sup> Lanzone is currently the President of the International Public Art, a corporation under the umbrella of the Marlborough Gallery in Chelsea.

<sup>14</sup> Lanzone, "The Public Voice."

longer shares this collective understanding of purpose, but in many cases audiences still seem to long for it.



**Figure 9: Columbian Exposition, Chicago (1893).**

**Image courtesy Chicago Historical Society.**

The City Beautiful movement declined when the Great Depression hit in the 1930s, resulting in a turn toward Modernist ideas that would continue to pick up speed in the 1940s and 1950s. Again, grand visions of razed ailing neighborhoods, orderly mile-high tower blocks and superhighways of the future were to replace congestion, disorder and heterogeneity. Le Corbusier is the architect most often associated with Modernism vis à vis the built environment. While

his ideas and designs were in fact utopian and optimistic, and his belief in the power of art in design was paramount, his influence (and that of many others) and ideas now reflect what became much maligned top-down practices.

As Modernist principles took root, President Roosevelt established the New Deal which included some federal arts programs, the best known of which is the Works Progress Administration (WPA) program, which teamed artists, architects and other designers together in the creation of a new national culture.<sup>15</sup> President Kennedy paved the way for the GSA's Fine Arts Program, the precursor to the Art-and-Architecture program that was established in 1963, which nearly five decades later, still commissions projects though is significantly diminished in power.

Percent-For-Art programs were born – mandates that required a certain percentage (usually about 1%) of new construction costs be put aside for public art projects. These programs flourished on both state and local levels, and turned public art into an omnipresent and widespread phenomenon. In 1967, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) created its “Art in Public Places” program to “give

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<sup>15</sup> Heartney, “Introduction.”

the public access to the best art of our time outside of museum walls.”<sup>16</sup> Nixon appointed Nancy Hanks as the head of the NEA in 1969 who developed new national/state relationships, and brought the NEA budget from \$8.2 million in 1970 to \$123.5 million in 1978. Hanks also grew the department (staff, grants, awards) substantially. Under Hanks’ tenure public art was called upon to create new civic identities. Such endeavors were seen as a distinct critique of Modernist architecture, and art and architecture were at this point considered separate spheres.

Two of the most commonly cited first, big projects are the Picasso Sculpture in Chicago’s Daley Plaza (1967) and Alexander Calder’s *La Grande Vitesse* in Grand Rapids, Michigan (1969). Richard Serra’s *Tilted Arc* (1979-1989), one of my case studies, is also an example of this “Art in Public Places” model, and in some ways can be seen as the Modernist era’s grand finale for “plop art.” These examples reflect Modernism as it played out in contemporary art from the 1950s through the end of the 1970s; both in theory and practice, ideals of truth and integrity over figurative representation and narrative idealism took precedence.<sup>17</sup> Content took a back seat to

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<sup>16</sup> Jacob, “Outside the Loop.”

<sup>17</sup> Lanzone, “The Public Voice.”

the experience of the material object. The purity of art was still seen as in need of protection at that time, and public debate centered on artistic style rather than public values.<sup>18</sup>



**Figure 10: Chicago Picasso. Image Senie 2001.**

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<sup>18</sup> Finkelpearl, *Dialogues in Public Art*; Lacy, *Mapping the Terrain*.

Public art, in spite of its “publicness,” was an autonomous object, pedagogical only in so far as it brought previously museum-confined aesthetic conversations outside. Artists working in the “Art in Public Places” model did not, by and large, pay much attention to the site or context of the work. Instead the site was a neutral container. In fact, as Art Historian Miwon Kwon – who has based her entire work on public art on its relationship to site – points out, Calder didn’t even feel the need to visit the site. By the time of *Tilted Arc* however, “site-specific” had become part of everyday public art discourse. Definitions of site have varied, and critical engagement with site (in whatever form) is sometimes no more than a token (or politicized) gesture. Nevertheless, it has long been used to give critical and popular legitimacy to projects and is certainly a relevant concept for all four of my case studies, situated in particular New York City spaces – a park, a plaza, a square and a system.

## POST-MODERNISM: THE 1980S

The 1980s were a time when the possibilities for public art began to diversify. As Harriet Senie describes it: “In the 1980s art world of shifting paradigms, any stylistic categorization became problematic, if not beside the point.”<sup>19</sup> Senie is the foremost Art Historian to

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<sup>19</sup> Senie, *Tilted Arc Controversy*, 53.

critically examine Richard Serra’s *Tilted Arc*, and she has contributed several books and articles to the topic. In many ways *Tilted Arc* is exceptional, however; not only did most public art by the 1980s not consist of monolithic abstract pieces in highly visible plazas, but most public art never reaches the levels of controversy of *Tilted Arc*, nor any level of controversy at all.

While *Tilted Arc* cemented a particular trepidation toward commissioning potentially risky projects, the 1980s were already characterized by the propagation of art that was universally appealing, easy to digest and for all intents and purposes, commissioned solely to blend and enhance. In contrast to the raging ego of an artist like Richard Serra, a generation of artists turned increasingly toward art projects that would blend seamlessly with the environment and in so doing reject the idea that art’s role was to create any sort of critical intervention. Art historians Rosalyn Deutsche and Douglas Crimp have both identified the split between public art that is utopian and integrationist, versus art that is interrogative and interventionist.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Deutsche, *Evictions*; Krauss, *Richard Serra*.

Administrators and the public had lost faith in elaborate formal solutions to socio-political and economic issues. Artists started to team up with architects, urban designers, landscape architects and city administrators to design functional places and spaces (including benches, fountains, plazas etc). Art was valued for its integrative potential to fix up deteriorating parks and public places, and not necessarily as an object separate from its architectural context.

The artist Scott Burton (whose benches sit on the ground floor of the original Media Lab at M.I.T.) is one of the best-known artists of this kind of public art. Burton is an exception as he made some notably and well-received projects, and was quite progressive in his arguments about the role of public art being to serve the public. Although there are some other significant projects in this vein, for the most part the 1980s was a semi-dead zone in terms of the criticality of public art; a transitional and nebulous moment for it. Nevertheless, this kind of art continues to be popular in cities across the globe. It is seen as a soft, unproblematic intervention.

Those in the public art industry at the time (including artists and critics) by then believed the way to make art more public was to establish a formal link to the site, hence the revised NEA

guidelines<sup>21</sup> – all of which worked to make public art more like architecture. The appropriation of site-specific public art for the valorization of urban identities came at a time when a fundamental cultural shift was occurring. Architecture and urban planning, formerly the primary media for expressing a vision of the city, were being displaced by other media more intimate with marketing and



**Figure 11: Burton *Urban Plaza South*, New York City (1985-6).**

**Image Knight 2008.**

<sup>21</sup> In 1987, an NEA press release was issued that signaled the shift to a “diversity of responses to public places,” (read: no longer a free-standing object), and by 1993 the Art in Public Places and Visual Artist Forums had been merged under a singular funding umbrella.

advertising.<sup>22</sup> Rosalyn Deutsche, who has written extensively about the widespread reductive and subversive cooption of public art, also examined the shift toward “Art as Public Places,” critically:

As art works pursued this, they were often hailed as a progressive, radical gesture in art. In addition to the discursive conflation of utility and art and social benefit, there was a significant misrecognition of the operative social function of architecture and urban design in this utilitarian approach to public art. Just as the social function of public art was conceived in limited terms of physical utility, what might be called Art as Public Spaces model of public art, likewise, imagined the social function of architecture and urban design in similarly reductive terms as the provision of basic physical support or shelter.<sup>23</sup>

Beyond aesthetic considerations, there were many problems with the process element of this collaborative shift. Tom Finkelpearl wrote about a project in Seattle:

Although the artists and the designers spoke a common language of form and material, they were far apart in their understanding of how the individual creative process of art and design worked, let alone how they

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<sup>22</sup> Kwon, “For Hamburg: Public Art and Urban Identities.”

<sup>23</sup> Deutsche, “Rosalyn Deutsche: The Question of ‘Public Space’.”

might be integrated into a real project... by 1990 artists were absorbed in the bureaucracy of collaboration.<sup>24</sup>

The NEA codified this change in 1982 by modifying the guidelines again. Although many artists were initially enthusiastic about the possibility of working with architects and planners to design public places, they soon grew disillusioned, as it was clear the process was not equitable. Architects tended to dominate the process, and still do.<sup>25</sup>

The turn toward architects as public artists is exemplified by the choice of 21-year old Maya Lin, an architecture student at Yale at the time, to design Washington D.C.’s Vietnam War Memorial. The importance of memorials and monuments goes back as far as the origins of public art history itself, and the success of the project can be seen in the proceeding generation of architects who consider themselves public artists. Memorials are beyond the purview of this thesis (they alone could be the basis for one), but the significance is that this conflation of art and architecture was happening deeply and widely at the nexus of art and the built environment.

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<sup>24</sup> Finkelpearl, *Dialogues in Public Art*.

<sup>25</sup> Kwon, “Miwon Kwon: Public Art and Urban Identities.”

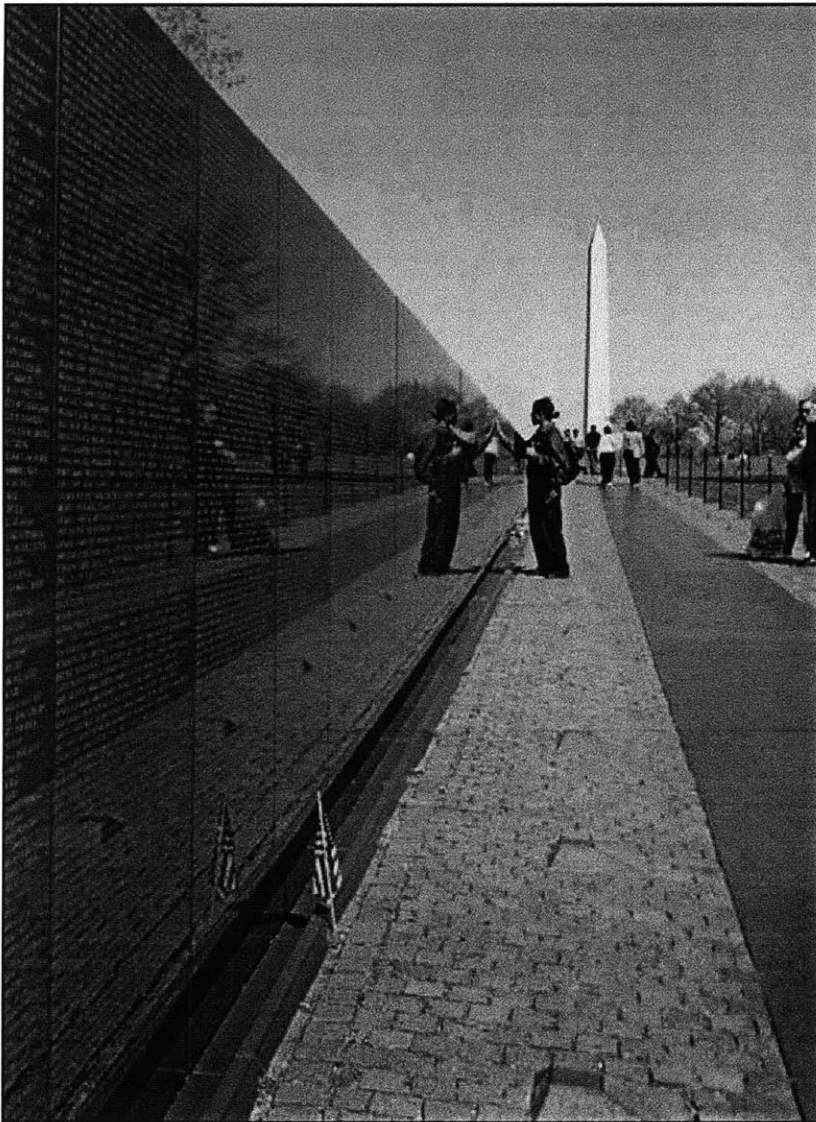


Figure 12: Maya Lin Vietnam War Memorial, D.C. 1982.

## THE GROWING ART OF NEOLIBERALISM

*Tilted Arc's* installation and dismantling spanned the exact years of Ronald Reagan's presidency (1981-1989). The event happened over the course of an important shift in the political economy of the country, towards a neoliberalization of the market. The "Reagan Revolution," or "Reaganomics," reliant on supply side economics, was a trickle-down model that instituted widespread tax cuts, decreased social spending (but spent more on defense) and deregulated domestic markets. Dismantling the Keynesian welfare state, the shift was, as Deborah Cowen from the University of Toronto puts it, "away from rights-based entitlements and towards user fees and other individualizing and 'active' forms of citizenship, 'flexible' work practices and a faith in the power of private enterprise to cure all that ails us."<sup>26</sup>

What this meant for cities like New York was the ramped up commoditization of urban space and art itself.<sup>27</sup> Geographer David Harvey has written several seminal books criticizing global capitalism, a recent one being *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* in

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<sup>26</sup> Cowen, "Activist Planning and the Neoliberal City: The Case of Planning Action."

<sup>27</sup> Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*; Deutsche, *Evictions*; Kwon, "For Hamburg: Public Art and Urban Identities"; Zukin, *Naked City*.

2005. Both internally and on a global scale, the shift toward a neoliberal model has pushed cities toward competing with each other to lure businesses, cultural capital and the people who participate in such markets.

Cuts to planning enforced the profession's role as reactor and enabler of the physical transformation of cities to accommodate such a social and economic agenda. Deborah Cowen, a professor at the University of Toronto and member of Planning Action, has been fighting against some of the ways that the late capitalist model has negatively impacted urban planning. Cowen argues that, using the language of participatory and democratic planning practice,<sup>28</sup> but instead often replacing citizen consultations with corporate interests and private professionals, urban planning became by-and-large complicit with the neoliberal agenda "trickling down" from above. Planners (and architects) have been – and still are – overly blamed for the failures of Modernism on cities and have too often been undiscerning about the quick-fix applications they have engaged in to fix glaring urban problems.

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<sup>28</sup> Cowen, "Activist Planning and the Neoliberal City: The Case of Planning Action."

The shift from a manufacturing to a service economy meant that some cities benefited, while many fell further into decline. New York City, while also subject to another 1980s boom – immigration – is a prime US example of a city that redeveloped in line with the late capitalist model of urban restructuring. The socioeconomic inequalities linked to immigration were a reality directly tied into the redevelopment of vast swathes of New York City, and Manhattan in particular. The "neoliberal city," it has been argued, is one that not only allows for economic inequality, but actively promotes it.<sup>29</sup>

Curator Helen Molesworth edited and wrote an essay for the book *Work Ethic* (2003). She posits a new framework for analyzing artistic practices since the 1960s, one in which the artist's relationship to his or her work is understood as operating within larger work force shifts (from an industrial to service economy).

## THE "CREATIVE ECONOMY"

The idea of the "Creative Economy" grew alongside the transition to a neoliberal economy. The use of art and culture to compete in aforementioned ways has contributed to what some fear is the

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<sup>29</sup> Deutsche, *Evictions*; Harvey, *Social Justice and the City*.



“Disneyfication” of Manhattan. Richard Florida is the best-known writer on what he has named in his many books, “The Creative Class.” His theories revolve around the idea that cities with high concentrations of creative workers – measured with the likes of the ‘bohemian index,’ ‘gay index’ and ‘diversity index’ – are the most successful at urban regeneration and economic development. His books have created many opponents, but have also highlighted, if not outright generated an entire literature devoted to the use of the arts and “creative industries” to regenerate flagging urban economies. Critics have accused Florida of “whitewashing” the negative effects of “creative city development.”

Many critics have written about gentrification and urban renewal, and the uses of art and culture to do so. Public art as public policy is a strategic, directed and particular type of urban intervention. Miwon Kwon urges us to distinguish between “the cultivation of art and places and their appropriation for the promotion of cities as cultural commodities.”<sup>30</sup>

Sharon Zukin and Michael Sorkin are two authors who have written extensively about the use of art and culture within the gentrification

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<sup>30</sup> Kwon, “For Hamburg: Public Art and Urban Identities.”

of New York City, Manhattan in particular. Zukin has written numerous books lamenting the demise of New York City under the auspices of gentrification, including *The Culture of Cities*, *Loft Living: Cultural and Capital in Urban Change*, and most recently *Naked City: the Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places*. Michael Sorkin has written extensively about the decline of the neighborhood and the rise of gentrification, commoditization and homogenization. He is co-author with Zukin of *After the World Trade Center: Rethinking New York City*, and most recently *All Over the Map*, which raises issues about participation and public space in the post-9/11 world.



**Figure 13: The contentious gentrification of Harlem's 125th Street.**

**Image Williams, New York Times 2008.**

Gentrification, as defined by Neil Smith and Michael LeFavre, is “the rehabilitation of working-class inner-city neighborhoods for

upper-middle class consumption.”<sup>31</sup> The role of urban planning in gentrification is a complicated one, but in many instances within the current late capitalist model it seems clear that both planners and public art administrators have acted more often as enablers than in opposition to predominant market forces.<sup>32</sup> Smith and LeFaivre define gentrification mainly in terms of competing class conflicts, as defined within a broader social and economic context. They argue that the nebulous concept of community within capitalist discourse relies on its ability to reproduce labor power. Community is social and material, while neighborhood is purely spatial/material (reliant on real estate markets). They define the shift from the community as the source of labor power to a commodity itself, and the dependence on a ‘rent gap’ between actual rent value and potential rent value. The rent gap serves institutions (state and financial), not individuals, and especially not working-class ones. The word revitalization is often substituted for gentrification, but the effects are the same.

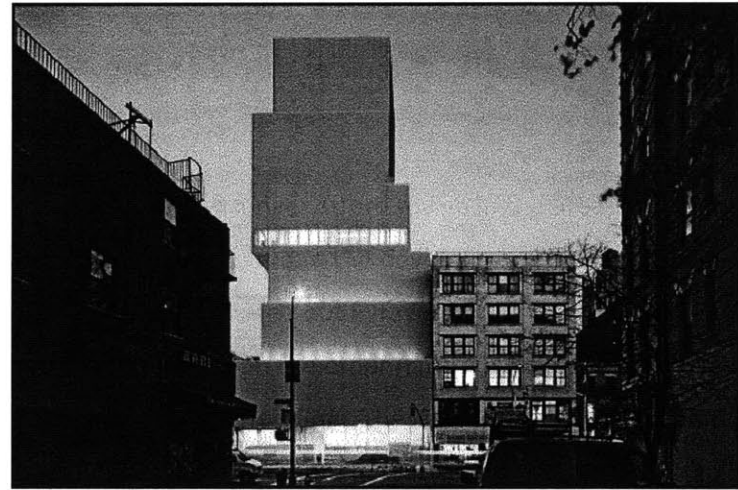
The artist-as-first-stage-gentrifier has been both bemoaned and lauded by those participating in its mythology. Bemoaning it are the

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<sup>31</sup> Smith and LeFaivre, “A Class Analysis of Gentrification.”

<sup>32</sup> Cowen, “Activist Planning and the Neoliberal City: The Case of Planning Action.”

artists who can no longer afford to live in the areas to which they moved and participated in the development of vibrant communities. Instead they are pushed out in favor of moneyed clientele and business interests. On the other hand such shifts can be used as justification for arts funding. The New Museum of Contemporary Art built a new home on the Bowery in 2007, on Manhattan’s Lower East Side. In 2010 Lisa Phillips, Director of the museum, explicitly stated that the declining status of the neighborhood was the very reason they chose to build the new \$50 million museum there. “We’ve been a great agent of change,” Phillips said.<sup>33</sup>



**Figure 14: The New Museum: Bowery, NYC, Image [www.archdaily.com](http://www.archdaily.com)**

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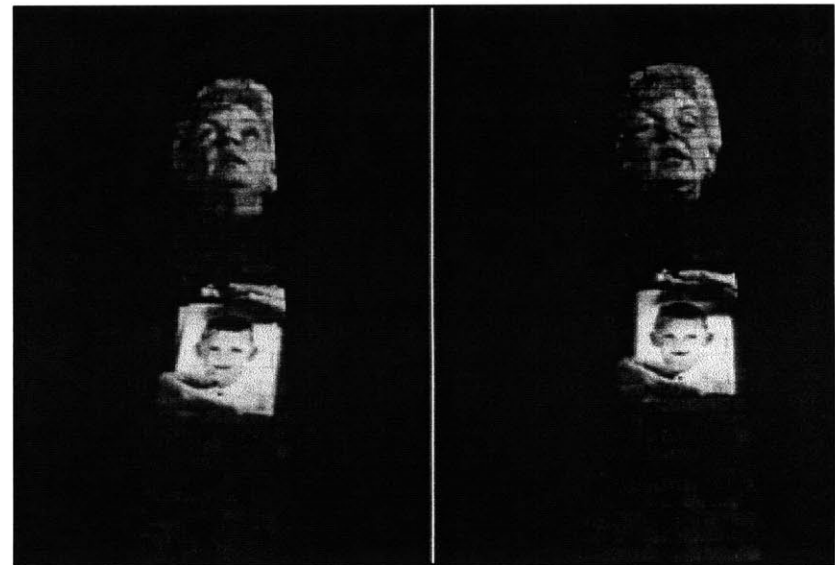
<sup>33</sup> Souccar, “Bloomberg budgets \$750M for the arts.”

## ART AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT

Malcolm Miles was one of the first (and few) people to write specifically about the complications of the claims made for public art within urban planning and development. In *Art for Public Spaces: Critical Essays* (1989), *Art, Space and the City: Public Art and Urban Futures* (1997) and *Urban Futures: Critical Commentaries on Shaping the City* (2003), Miles takes issue with the broad claims made for public art as an urban redevelopment strategy, drawing on a variety of critical perspectives to query how and whether public art is relevant to architecture, urban planning and urban design in the UK and abroad.

Tackling similar subject matter has been Sara Selwood, also based in the UK. In 1995 Selwood wrote *The Benefits of Public Art* for the Policy Studies Institute, which challenged the opacity surrounding the perceived benefits of public art (social, cultural, political and economic) and looked at revelatory moments in the development, implementation and reception of several public art projects. Selwood reckons that ambiguities in the definitions of public art add up to a field that is not only ill evaluated, but also lacking in accountability and transparency.

Rosalyn Deutsche wrote *Evictions* in 1996, one of the most influential works to critically examine the use of public art in the service of late capitalism. Deutsche wrote about the instrumentalization of public art as a tool in the Koch administration, and the use of art by critics on both the left and right to give democratic legitimacy to what were actually covert political and economic agendas, many of which were detrimental to the mixed socioeconomic stratum that had once existed in New York City. Deutsche's theoretical framework provides an interesting



**Figure 15: Wodiczko Bunker Hill Monument Project, Boston (1998)**

counterpoint to most of the literature and methodologies that I use in this thesis.

## DISSENTING VOICES

Alongside the institutional shifts in public art, there were various countercultural art practices springing up in New York City in the early 1980s. Colab, Group Material, Fashion Moda, ABC No Rio, and P.A.D.D. were among the loudest collectives making themselves heard across the city. In high relief to the tenuous longevity of *Tilted Arc* and other Modernist “art in public places” pieces across the United States, art as autonomous object was losing its power. Writer/curator Arlene Raven argued an activist, feminist stance for public art in the USA; she was the chief art critic for the *Village Voice* in the mid-1980s, and contributed articles and essays to many other publications. Artists like Krzysztof Wodiczko<sup>34</sup> and Martha Rosler staged interrogative art projects in Lower Manhattan, and Vito Acconci and Mierle Ukeles “challenged traditional notions of

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<sup>34</sup> Rosalyn Deutsche has long supported Krzysztof Wodiczko’s art work. Among various kinds of work, he is well known for his projections onto buildings in western cities. One of his central themes is the marginalization and unjust practices levied upon homeless and other “non-productive” (in a Marxist sense of the word) agents by those in power.

sites for art. They imagined fluid intersections with the city, creating public space for their art in a way that had tremendous influence.”<sup>35</sup>

## PARTICIPATION AS DEMOCRACY, AS ART

The importance of public participation and engagement hit urban planning in a visible way decades before it did the practice of public art. The breakdown of the top-down hierarchy of Modernist urban planning gave way to “Advocacy Planning” in the 1960s, followed by “Equity Planning” in the 1970s, both of which sought to incorporate groups previously excluded from planning decisions into the process of urban decision-making.<sup>36</sup>

Local community members called for transparency and accountability in the development process, and were incorporated into what was envisioned as a democratic process. Public hearings became a mainstay and feedback mechanisms were established. Artists were also seen as increasingly accountable.<sup>37</sup> Public presentations by artists to community groups became popular, and

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<sup>35</sup> Finkelpearl, *Dialogues in Public Art*.

<sup>36</sup> Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*.

<sup>37</sup> Phillips, “Out of Order: The Public Art Machine”; Lacy, *Mapping the Terrain*.

arts administrators also became mediators. As Tom Finkelpearl explains it:

The new approach to urban renewal involved the participation of people from the affected communities, a radical and controversial departure from the top-down development practices... it was not until the Nixon administration that these programs were essentially dismantled.<sup>38</sup>

And so “Urban Renewal” gave way to “Community Redevelopment.” The idea of a unitary public had been recognized as a fallacy.<sup>39</sup> “Planning from above,” was seen as inherently undemocratic and unjust. By becoming advocates and mediators, urban planning became increasingly reactive. Turning to nonspatial practices, this

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<sup>38</sup> Finkelpearl, *Dialogues in Public Art*.

<sup>39</sup> Though recently, according to Fainstein (“Can we Make the Cities we Want?”), “There has been a revival of explicit discussion of the appropriate values that ought to govern urban life (Harvey, 1996; Swydegouw, 1997; Healey, 1992, 1997; Fischer and Forester, 1993; Sennett, 1990; Beauregard, 1989; Environment and Planning D, 1997). These contemporary efforts, with varying success, have had to take account of the post-modernist/post-structuralist assault on the existence of a unitary ethic and its emphasis on the situatedness of the speaker. Thus, recent work has both attempted to recognize the divided, perceptual nature of social concepts of the good and still to lay out a broad common value structure, even if that structure embraces difference itself.”

period is marked by a loss of common purpose for urban planning, a paradigm shift that continues to haunt the profession today.<sup>40</sup>

Some artists had been interested in working with members of the community since the 1960s and 1970s – within a genre that loosely fits leading practitioner Suzanne Lacy’s 1990s term “new genre public art” – but the dematerialization of art did not become mainstream until after *Tilted Arc* was dismantled in 1989.

Lacy described the larger shift: “The construction of a history of new genre public art is not built on a typology of materials, spaces, or artistic media, but rather on concepts of audience, relationship, communication, and political intention.”<sup>41</sup> Lacy attributes the late recognition to four main causes: 1) Increased racial discrimination and violence stemming from a 1980s conservative backlash, 2) Anger against conservative attempts to circumscribe the gains made by women in the previous decades, 3) Censorship efforts by politicians (in line with conservative fundamentalists) targeting women, ethnic, and homosexual artists, and 4) A deepening awareness of the growing health (namely AIDS) and ecological

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<sup>40</sup> Fainstein, “Can we make the cities we want.”

<sup>41</sup> Lacy, *Mapping the Terrain*.

crises.<sup>42</sup> There was a growing need for a diversity of voices to be heard, and art suddenly seemed one of the most appropriate vehicles for doing so on a large-scale.

This late-blooming shift in public art practice toward social practice can also be traced in both top-down policies and bottom-up practices. Whereas the NEA guidelines in 1974 were for art that would be “appropriate to the site,” by the late 1980s and 1990s community involvement became a key component of commissioning guidelines. Stakeholders were brought onto panels, meant to represent the broad interests of the “community.”

Chicago became a leading public arts center in the United States, and the now well-documented Culture in Action program epitomized this “new genre public art” model. Independent curator Mary Jane Jacobs produced Culture in Action, with Suzanne Lacy as one of its main artists, at various sites around Chicago in 1993. The project was seen as a radical break from previous modes of public art practice. It de-emphasized one artist as sole creator of a work (instead the artist was a socio-politically active agent), and instead

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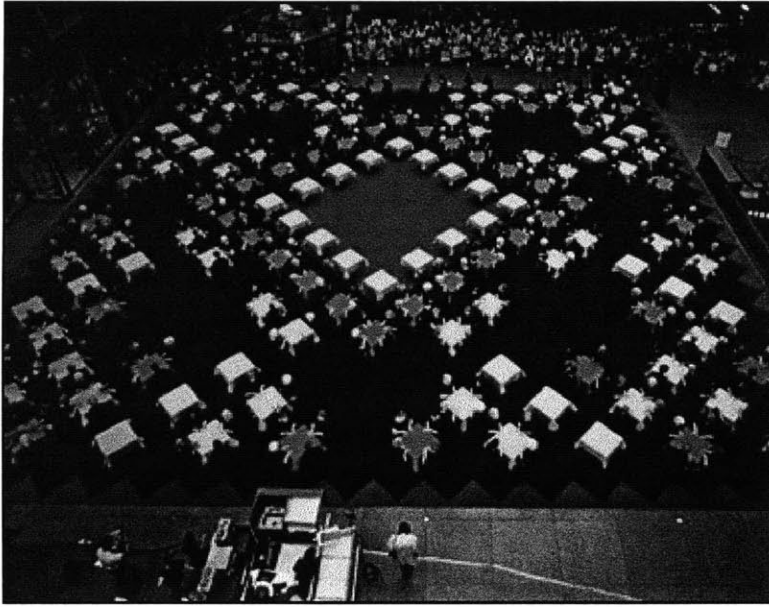
<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

meaning was seen as derived from collaborative efforts with “diverse communities.”

Hinging on the issues raised by Lacy in her explanation for the rise of “new genre public art,” we can see how such shifts would have occurred at the end of the Reagan era. Art in this vein, according to Mary Jane Jacobs, had shifted to serving a primarily social function: “Rather than serving to promote the economic development of American cities, it is now being viewed as a means of stabilizing community development throughout urban centers. In the nineties, the role of public art has shifted from that of renewing the physical environment to that of improving society, from promoting aesthetic quality to contributing to the quality of life, from enriching lives to saving lives.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Kwon, “Miwon Kwon: Public Art and Urban Identities.”



**Figure 16: Suzanne Lacy *Crystal Quilts*, Minneapolis (1985-7).**

**Image Kester 2004.**

With an explicit emphasis on improving socio-political community issues, “new genre public art” projects were often temporary, and strove to be collaborative and socially revolutionary. Although the role of public participation came to be seen as undeniably relevant to both urban planning and public art, it has proven controversial and problematic in both fields. In public art, trying to define the “public” is highly challenging. Miwon Kwon, Grant Kester, Claire Bishop and Hal Foster have been some of the most vocal critics of

this kind of art. “Aesthetic evangelists” and “Artists as Ethnographer” are some of the pejorative titles of critical works in this vein.

Susan Fainstein describes the populist goal of participation and civic engagement as a truly post-modern concept.<sup>44</sup> The idea that a diverse group of stakeholders can come together, discuss issues, build consensus, compromise and eventually lead to some sort of ideal solution is a utopian one. The development of participatory planning also emerges from the same ideals – a belief in the power of citizens to create their own reality.

As with community-based art however, there are many problems with participation in planning.<sup>45</sup> As we will see especially in the chapter on *Tilted Arc*, to reiterate what I mentioned in the introduction, notions of public and community engender many problematic relations, including those of power and communication, disenfranchisement and the misappropriation of democracy. The words “public,” “community,” “audience,” and “participation” are thrown around loosely, interchangeably and often presented as

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<sup>44</sup> Fainstein, “Can we make the cities we want.”

<sup>45</sup> According to Susan Fainstein, these include NIMBYism (not in my backyard), lack of accountability of community representatives, susceptibility to demagoguery.

concepts whose meanings are universally given, which is a dangerous tendency.

## PUBLIC ART AS DISCOURSE

Also in the 1990s, critical discourse surrounding public art began to develop. Patricia Phillips was one of the first Art Historians to take on the subject, previously considered outside the realm of contemporary art discourse and criticality. Writing several seminal articles, including “Out of Order: The Public Art Machine” (*Artforum* 1988) and “Public Constructions” (*Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* 1995), Phillips began to posit the particular opportunities and constraints that might be unique to public art, as well as was the first person to contest the previously undisputed idea that the “publicness” of a work of art came naturally from its site; “publicness” is a psychological, not geographical construct. Phillips’ optimism for public art’s potential lies in its potential to reconstitute the public commons, or shared democratic space. W.J.T. Mitchell, Professor at the University of Chicago and editor of interdisciplinary journal *Critical Inquiry*, wrote “The Violence of Public Art: ‘Do the Right Thing,’” (*Critical Inquiry* 1990) about “the relation of images, violence and the public sphere” (with Spike Lee’s film of the same

name being the central case study), and subsequently contributed to the field with his book *Art and the Public Sphere* (1993).

Artist/designer Vito Acconci’s “Public Space in a Private Time” (also from *Critical Inquiry* 1990) toyed with various meanings of the term “public space,” and presented the artist/practitioner’s point of view within the newly emerging critical literature. Rosalyn Deutsche also gained traction for her book *Evictions* (1996) in which she laid out the aforementioned arguments about art, public space and urban development within the newly neoliberal city that she had begun to make in the late 1980s.

## PUBLIC ART NOW

In the late 1990s, there was a growing interest in the possibilities of social practice, as well as an awareness of the effects of globalization and placelessness on art. In 1997 Lucy Lippard wrote an influential book called *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society*. She saw the rise of temporary artist-in-residency programs and public art projects where big-name artists flew in but otherwise had no connection a site, as endemic of the dangers connected to the rising popularity of a nomadic lifestyle. Lippard argued instead for the importance of place and local loyalty.





to public art. Her argument largely rests on a Marxist analysis of the production of space: neutralized, fragmented and commoditized in the service of late capitalism. Miwon Kwon has been critical of Lucy Lippard's work, calling it "nostalgic" in light of the current political economy. In urban planning, ecological concerns also created a growing interest in sustainability and local resources. Both practices have proponents calling for us all to slow down and establish a longer-term relationship with "place," in all its various meanings.

In 1998 Relational Aesthetics became the "next big thing" in contemporary art. French curator Nicholas Bourriaud coined the term to describe "a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space."<sup>46</sup> The Palais de Tokyo in Paris opened in 2002, and Bourriaud was one of two co-directors. The main spaces were left bare and unfinished on purpose, to signify the new laboratory-studio model that he was championing (with curators Hans Ulrich

**Figure 17: Carsten Holler at London's Tate Modern (2006).**

**Image David Olivari 2006.**

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<sup>46</sup> Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*.

Obrist, Maria Lind, Barbara van der Linden, etc) where art was a constant work-in-progress.<sup>47</sup> In direct opposition to the high Modernist model of art making, Relational art was to be created collectively; a set of intersubjective encounters and/or a model for living or action.<sup>48</sup> Further, the site, instead of being fixed in geographic space, is an "intertextually coordinated, multiply located, discursive field of operation."<sup>49</sup>

At a two-day conference I attended in the autumn of 2010 in New York, Creative Time's 2<sup>nd</sup> annual 'Summit,' when the term Relational Aesthetics was mentioned the whole auditorium let out a collective sigh. Gavin Kroeber, producer at Creative Time, attributed this (with the caveat that he of course couldn't speak for everyone) to the self-selecting audience, and the mixed success of Relational Art to produce real social change. For many, it still conformed too closely and explicitly to a gallery model. Miwon Kwon has been skeptical from the beginning: "I remain unconvinced of the ways a model of meaning and interpretation is called forth to validate, even romanticize, the material and socioeconomic realities of an itinerant

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<sup>47</sup> Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics."

<sup>48</sup> Liam Gillick, Rirkrit Taravaniya and Maurizio Cattelan are some of the best-known artists classified as 'Relational'

<sup>49</sup> Kwon, *One Place after Another*.

lifestyle. I am suspicious of this analogical transposition and the seductive allure of nomadism it supports.”<sup>50</sup> There is something about site they all seem to argue, as a fixed set of physical and socio-political attributes, that is important to our psychological, cultural and social well being.

Perhaps the most important shift to happen in the last ten to fifteen years has been the growing practice of (multivalent), co-produced work. This is the kind of work likely to be the target of the question “is it art?” Social practice is similar to Relational Aesthetics in many ways but is less high theory, and more of a practiced activism, both community-oriented and collaborative. The California College of the Arts (CCA) offers a concentration in “Social practice.” Testament to the diversity of the term’s application is the program’s overview statement:

Social practices incorporates art strategies as diverse as urban interventions, utopian proposals, guerrilla architecture, “new genre” public art, social sculpture, project-based community practice, interactive media, service dispersals, and street performance. The field focuses on topics such as aesthetics, ethics, collaboration, persona, media strategies, and social activism, issues that are central to artworks and projects that cross into public and social spheres. These varied

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

forms of public strategy are linked critically through theories of relational art, social formation, pluralism, and democracy. Artists working within these modalities either choose to co-create their work with a specific audience or propose critical interventions within existing social systems that inspire debate or catalyze social exchange.<sup>51</sup>

This summer gone (2010), Creative Time produced a project in Times Square called *Key to the City*. Led by artist Paul Ramírez Jonas, the project continued nonprofit Creative Time’s work within the realm of social practice. “Thousands of keys (were) bestowed by thousands of people on thousands of citizens for thousands of reasons that deserve to be recognized.”<sup>52</sup> Each key unlocked one of twenty-four sites across New York City, and participants were given guidebooks that led them on a veritable scavenger hunt.

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<sup>51</sup> California College of the Arts, “Social Practice Workshop.”

<sup>52</sup> In the words of its curator Nato Thompson.



Figure 18: Paul Ramirez Jonas/Creative Time's *Key to the City* (2010).

Image [www.timesquarenyc.org](http://www.timesquarenyc.org)

The project is interesting because of the range of participants that it attracted. In an interview with Christine Gaspar,<sup>53</sup> she mentioned how amazed she was while standing in line to receive her key. There seemed to be people from all different classes, ethnicities and ages, speaking various languages but united by an enthusiasm to interact with sites across the city. The project not only catalyzed new modes of participatory practice, it capitalized on the potential of the

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<sup>53</sup> Gaspar is the Director of the Center for Urban Pedagogy, and participated in the project last summer.

internet and other technologically advanced ways of communicating and engaging with broader swathes of the population than ever before. If one of the primary ways of gauging the success of a public art project is to look for a diversity of engagement,<sup>54</sup> and anecdotal stories hold true, *Key to the City* has much to offer the field of urban planning.

Raymond Ledrut, an urban semiotician, has written about the meanings of the built form suggested by signs in its material and codified production (i.e. streets and signage on the one hand, planning documents and architectural criticism on the other). Urban semiotics, under the umbrella of social semiotics, defines itself in opposition to behavioral geographers such as Kevin Lynch (whose work I will expand upon later in analyses of Mierle Ukeles's work). Ledrut argues that citizens create the cities in which they live, rather than the technocratic definition whereby the city is produced by a group of experts. The city becomes a social form rather than a "collection and organization of neutral physical objects."<sup>55</sup> The dynamic of the co-created city within the auspices of urban planning

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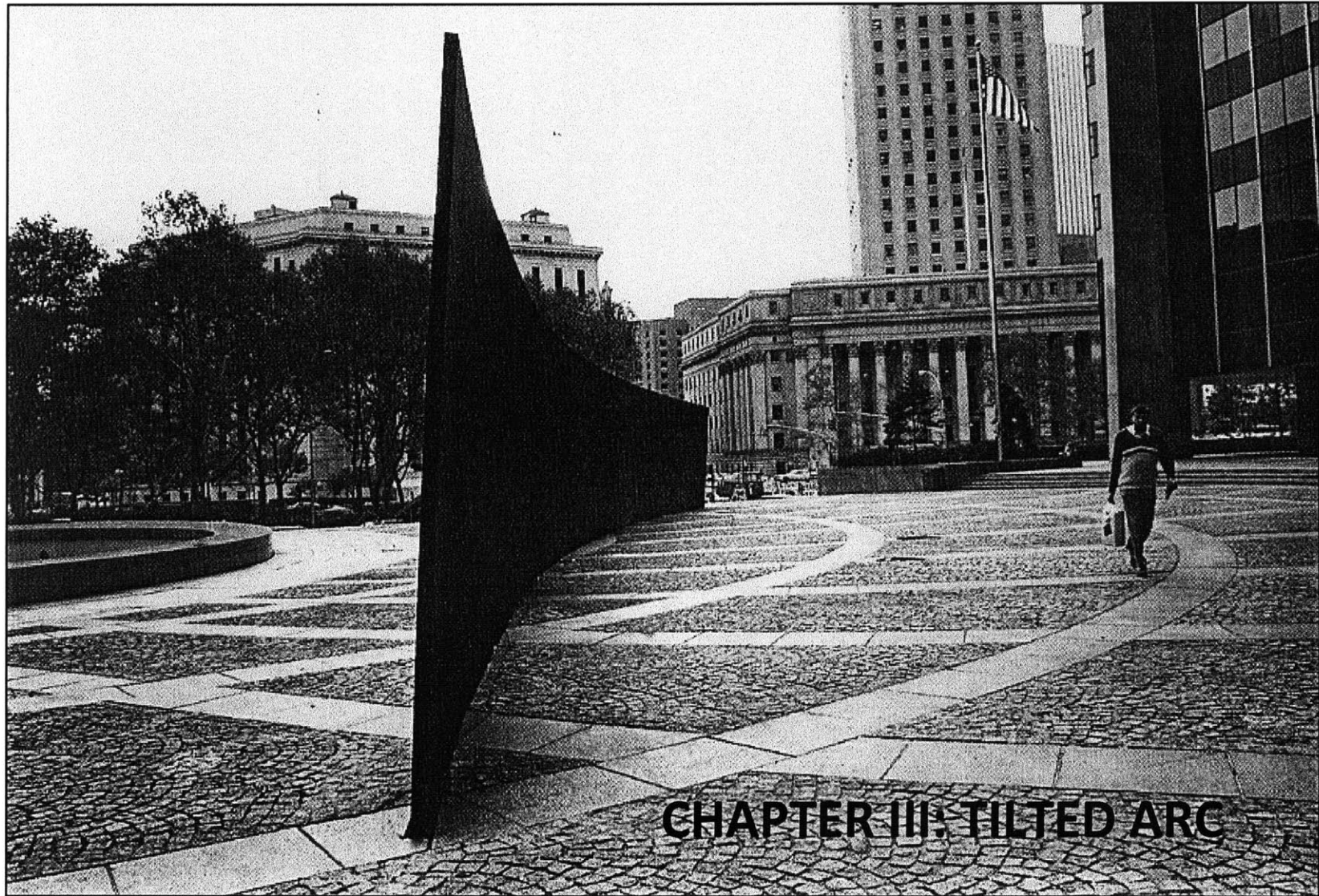
<sup>54</sup> Credit for this belief goes to Tom Finkelppearl who mentioned it during our interview 11/5/2010.

<sup>55</sup> Ledrut, "Speech and the Silence of the City."

has been a driving tension ever since the collapse of the Modernist model of city design and development.

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A broad narrative of the evolving relationship between public art and urban planning should, hopefully, provide a framework within which to situate the four case studies that follow. The tumultuous history of urban planning, from a profession first idealized, then vilified and continuously slipping out of definition's grasp, is one whose relationship to "art" is often overlooked. These four case studies reflect different motivations about the role of art in a city like New York. Juxtaposing them one after another may raise more questions than answers, but ultimately I believe it will be the questions that engage and change us.



**CHAPTER III. TILTED ARC**

*Tilted Arc* is the watershed public art case. It both reinforced and subverted stereotypes about art and audience, it acted as a mirror upon which to project challenging urban issues, and it unearthed the latent contradictions and complexities of public art in the post-modern western world. On an administrative level, it also marked a pronounced shift in funding policies for public art, on federal, state and local levels, and increased trepidation on the part of arts administrators and artists themselves for years to follow. It has been held up as emblematic of the culture wars that started raging in the 1980s. A case without precedent, the fate of *Tilted Arc* was the result of decisions made on an ad hoc basis.

*Tilted Arc* is, in a way, my antithetical case study. The controversy was detached from city bureaucracy, yet I believe it mirrors, and thus relates to, many of the same challenges that faced urban planners at the time. I decided that it was important to include *Tilted Arc* because it is iconic and has shaped public art discourse ever since. No matter how far projects stray from the intentions, implementation or reception of *Tilted Arc*, the piece lingers.

Therefore much of *Tilted Arc's* significance derives from the fact that most of its salient issues remain unresolved within public art.

The intentions of an artist toward an indefinable public, the nebulous values and responsibilities of art in a public setting, and the administrative complexities of commissioning, implementing and evaluating public art, remain contested questions.

Vis a vis the guiding questions I laid out in the introduction, I believe *Tilted Arc* is most salient with regards to the relationship between art and architecture in the public sphere, as well as provocative when considering whether this form of public art is still a cause worth fighting for in the future.

**Figure 19: *Tilted Arc*. Image Senie 2001.**

## THE STORY

*Tilted Arc* was originally commissioned by the GSA's Art-in-Architecture program in 1979; a program that is based on a Percent-for-Art model. In 1979, the process began with a recommendation from the building architect.<sup>56</sup> Following that, internal panels were established within the NEA and GSA to select an appropriate commission, and implementation followed formal approval procedures. Public feedback and larger community concerns were not sought, and the selection process was not an open call. As the site was technically federal property, there was an added remove from local concerns – administrative decisions were centralized in Washington D.C. at the time.

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<sup>56</sup> The exact, albeit paraphrased procedures at the time, were: 1) The building architect would recommend that an artwork be placed in the plaza, 2) A panel of 'qualified art professionals' would be set up by the NEA and GSA who would then select 3-5 possible artists (one of the former of whom needed to be from the area), first meeting with the building architect and representatives from the GSA and NEA to review possible projects, 3) the panel's nominations would be submitted to the GSA via formal letter from the NEA, 4) a panel at the GSA would review potential artists' past work and choose from the recommended selection, 4) a fixed-price contract was to be negotiated with the artist, and along the way reviews and approvals of the project concepts were to occur. Senie, *Tilted Arc Controversy*.

Richard Serra was unanimously chosen from a shortlist of six possible artists. Robert Irwin had been the original first choice (known for his use of light), but had recently been commissioned for a GSA project in D.C., and so Serra became the frontrunner by default. Serra had been showing regularly in the US and abroad (especially Germany) beginning in the late 1960s, and had already been the subject of several controversies. Nevertheless, he was well known and his work was of high merit in the artistic community, the two prevailing criteria at the time. Serra was a controversial figure himself, known for his colossal ego and lack of interest in appeasing a wide audience.

*Tilted Arc* was, from original plans to implementation, a 120-foot long, 10-foot high slab of self-rusting Cor-Ten steel. The project attracted negative attention even during the installation process.

Almost immediately Edward D. Re, chief judge of the U.S. Court of International Trade started to complain, and wrote a letter to the GSA in Washington protesting the sculpture's effect on the plaza.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Harriet Senie makes an interesting argument throughout her book about the possible irreconcilabilities of law with art. While the former seeks precedent as the legal basis for judgment, the latter has historically been about radically overturning whatever happened last. She uses this as the basis for why many lawyers and judges despised the sculpture from the start, as well as being at least partly to blame for its legal losses.



But most other general complaints had largely subsided until 1984 – when William Diamond was appointed New York’s GSA regional administrator.

Popular accounts depict the story as a battle of wills between William Diamond and Richard Serra, pitting them as enemies. According to Glenn Weiss, the frenzy over public hatred of *Tilted Arc* was a smokescreen for a story that is essentially about a fight between two men – an artist with no social skills and a control freak administrator.<sup>58</sup> Diamond made it his mission to remove *Tilted Arc* during his time in office, and he eventually succeeded. Dale Lanzone, who was appointed as Director of Arts and Historic Preservation at the GSA in 1987, has a different take on the story. Although it is true that Diamond personally disliked the sculpture, he was also a newly appointed administrator responding to complaints from a number of judges (more had aligned with Re) and surveys of the local office community who overwhelmingly disliked the project.

Part of the reason the controversy took so long and was so disorganized is that leadership at both the GSA and NEA was

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<sup>58</sup> Interview with Glenn Weiss, Manager of Public Art and Design, Times Square Alliance (11/08/2010).

constantly in transition throughout the decade. Neither organization had a consistent or strong voice within it that might have otherwise launched opposition to the sculpture’s removal.<sup>59</sup> Once Diamond had resolved to get rid of the sculpture, he focused his attacks on the idea that the sculpture ruined the use of the plaza, and suggested finding a suitable alternative site for the piece. Serra made it clear all along that moving the site-specific piece would destroy it.

In the winter of 1984 Diamond met with Donald Thalacker in Washington to request a hearing about possibly removing the sculpture. He was granted permission and subsequently sent out thousands of letters publicizing the hearing for March 6 – 8, 1985, as well as had fliers handed out in the local area, with a cartoon figure in revolutionary dress urging people to “speak out.”<sup>60</sup> Diamond then chaired the hearing, and appointed its five panel members, four of whom were either friends and/or colleagues, or staff members whose jobs depended on Diamond’s approval, and one of whom was a member of Christie’s auction house. The latter was the only one who would later vote against removal.

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<sup>59</sup> Senie, *Tilted Arc Controversy*.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

After Diamond's hearing, the decision then lay in the hands of the Washington office. Thalacker countered Diamond by offering an opposing rationale. He cited nine reasons that the sculpture should remain, including the fact that there was no suitable site to relocate the sculpture (especially in light of Serra's disapproval), the plaza had not been popular even before the sculpture was placed in it, the piece had been in place too short a time to measure its success or failure vis à vis audience appreciation,<sup>61</sup> its removal would damage the agency's credibility with artists in future commissions, and he raised the possibility that Diamond's methods were illegitimate.<sup>62</sup> Shortly thereafter, GSA administration changed again, and the next administrator (Terence C. Golden) forced *Tilted Arc* into a holding pattern, as he did not want the fate of the sculpture to fall under his tenure.

After Diamond's panel voted to remove the sculpture, Serra spent three years filing appeals (on grounds including First Amendment rights, contract infringement, and copyright and trademark issues, primarily). At the same time, review panels were set up to look for

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<sup>61</sup> A long-running (though contested) argument in favor of permanent artworks has been a belief that, over time, most projects will grow to be appreciated.

<sup>62</sup> Senie, *Tilted Arc Controversy*.

alternate locations, as well as ways to improve the plaza without removing the sculpture. There were potential buyers, but they quickly lost interest when they learned that Serra did not approve of its relocation.

Meanwhile internal reorganizations were rapidly underway. The GSA realized that it needed to redesign its selection methods to include representatives of the public, and needed to open the process up to compromise and dialogue. Art had yet to be subjected to the idea that everyone had a say, but *Tilted Arc's* removal marks the moment when art's autonomy in the public realm collapsed. In 1989, *Tilted Arc* was removed from Federal Plaza in the middle of the night.

## THE SIGNIFICANCE

The sculpture's lifespan was essentially the decade of the 1980s – a time of rapid cultural and political change in the US. Federal funding was slashed, markets were deregulated and more often than not, art in the public sphere came to be seen as a blasphemous waste of taxpayers' money.

The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) was challenged from the start of the decade, and by the end of the 1980s its dissolution seemed imminent. The collaboration between the NEA and the GSA also changed significantly during the decade, in no small part owing to *Tilted Arc*. The NEA and the GSA originally had a very close collaborative process for choosing work for the Art-in-Architecture program, with the shared goal of creating permanent works by major national artists. By the time *Tilted Arc* was chosen, monumental abstract sculpture was the established predominant public art form, even though it was an aesthetic often lost on the general public who were used to figurative and/or narrative presentations of art in the public realm.

By the time *Tilted Arc* was removed in 1989, the NEA was not only much weaker by then but its relationship with the GSA had all but deteriorated, largely due to striating political leanings to the left and right, given the political climate of the period. As a result, GSA panels started to consist of more local administrators than art professionals. In April 1989, the acting director of the NEA formally terminated its relationship with the GSA.

The symbolism of the NEA's demise (loss of power) since the 1960s is hugely relevant as the idealism formerly attributed to the role of an artist in American society was simultaneously dissolving. Michael Brenson, in *Visionaries and Outcasts*, writes about the flourishing of cultural and artistic growth during the period of the Cold War. Artistic autonomy was then considered proof that a society was democratic, free and socially just.<sup>63</sup>

Over time the complications of whether an artist was responsible to the art world (or more specifically, to the art itself) or the larger public (the classic Clement Greenberg argument resolved to the former), infiltrated the NEA and turned much public sentiment against the idea that an elite coterie of artists was being sponsored by public funds. The story of *Tilted Arc*, with Richard Serra as the artist, is the quintessential example of this battle.

A growing number of artists, especially those working in the public sphere, were also concerned that art's isolation and introversion was causing it to lose greater relevance. The social consciousness that grew in the 1980s, in no small part a backlash to the administration's conservative agenda, rippled through the NEA's

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<sup>63</sup> Brenson, *Visionaries and Outcasts*.

original aims – providing small grants to hundreds of artists, most of whom were in the beginnings of their careers – and also led to compromises in its original vision. The NEA was no longer sure what its central aim was, and continued to lose ground both financially and culturally.

### **SITE**

NEA guidelines had been altered to such an extent that by the late 1980s site was clearly understood as a social situation, not just a geographic one. The concept of site-specificity had by then also entered mainstream discourse. Broadly speaking, public art can have either an interrogative or assimilative relationship to its site and the surrounding architectural context (or none at all).<sup>64</sup> Richard Serra has always clearly been interested solely in the former mode.<sup>65</sup> He stated clearly (and *Tilted Arc* is certainly no exception) that he has no desire to satisfy “urban design principles,” and instead seeks to create sculpture that amplifies and points out the “horrendous” amount of urban architecture in the world. As such,

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<sup>64</sup> Mitchell, *Art and the Public Sphere*.

<sup>65</sup> In projects after *Tilted Arc* he did make some work that was more “functional” and more affirmative, but his roots as an artist were decidedly anti-authoritarian and individualistic.



**Figure 20: *Tilted Arc* aerial. Image Senie 2001.**

he considered *Tilted Arc* completely site-specific, both spatially and socio-politically.

The design of Federal Plaza, site of the sculpture and seat of the US federal presence in New York, had been flagrantly criticized since it was built in 1968. The 1961 zoning ordinance was in full effect at the time, incentivizing developers to incorporate public plazas into their projects by allowing them to increase their FAR ratio. Many of these sites are now recognized as failed public spaces, and Federal Plaza was no exception. The plaza was dismissed as a design atrocity

from the beginning, and yet in the course of the *Tilted Arc* controversy, Serra's sculpture came to be demonized as the destroyer of what was claimed to have been a harmonious and well-loved open space prior to *Tilted Arc*.<sup>66</sup> As Harriet Senie points out: "This criticism reflected an often unstated expectation that public art should function as urban renewal."<sup>67</sup> Even now, twenty years later with Serra's sculpture long-gone, the Project for Public Spaces calls Federal Plaza "An awesomely bad complex so disjointed it boggles the mind."<sup>68</sup>

*Tilted Arc* was also concurrent with a larger paradigm shift for public art, away from monolithic sculptures, and toward work that was more integrated with the environment. Rosalind Krauss's seminal article in 1979, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," marked the theoretical departure of sculpture into landscape and architecture (or architecture and not-architecture, landscape and not-landscape). Its long-standing history as autonomous object had presumably lost authority.

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<sup>66</sup> Glenn Weiss blames the failure of the architecture for the removal of *Tilted Arc*. Art served as a catalyst and receptacle (as it often does) for the anger implicit in having to work in poorly designed, depressing buildings.

<sup>67</sup> Senie, *Tilted Arc Controversy*.

<sup>68</sup> Project for Public Spaces, "Federal Plaza."

Art in the public sphere would no longer be allowed the license of Modernist purity, an object at odds with its environment. In the 1980s public art and urban planning would grow further apart. Architecture would subsume the role long attributed to public art, as architects and firms demonstrated their savvy in navigating the bureaucracy of building permanent "work" in cities across the country.

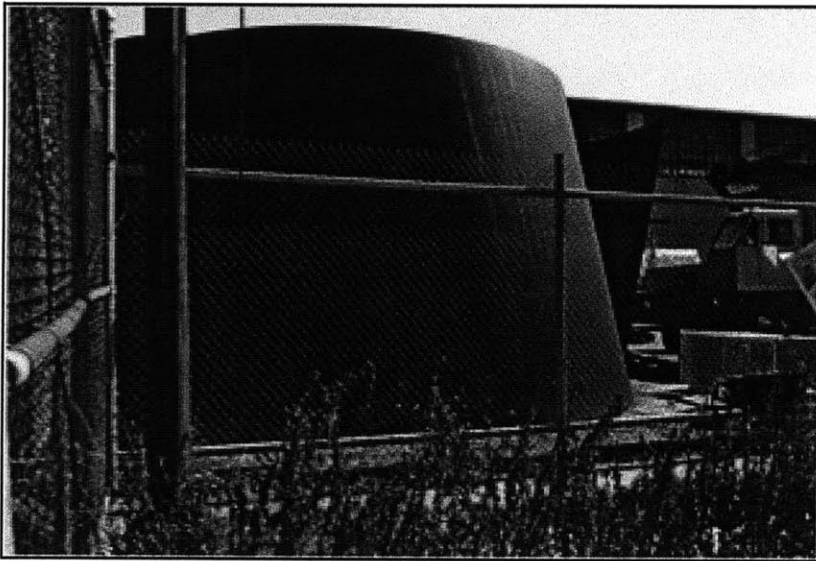
New York City is a prime example of the complexities and conservatism of commissioning and construction of so-called permanent structures. With a length of 13.4 miles and width of only 2.3 miles for Manhattan, in many ways it's no wonder. Yet even in cities with less-than-prime real estate, the commissioning and production processes for permanent public art have become an administrative nightmare with which few artists wish to engage.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> A recent story in *The Buffalo News* tells of a number of local artists and residents who developed a project to paint a number of city sidewalks in various colors and patterns to "spruce up" the area for an upcoming event. Although receiving widespread support, the project has been stuck in the Department of Public Works for 20 months. "Public art project stuck in the 'bureaucratic labyrinth' - Entertainment - The Buffalo News."

## AUDIENCE

*Tilted Arc* is well known because of its controversy, and its removal because “the people” hated it. The populist mythology that emerged most strongly over the course of *Tilted Arc* was that of the “people” versus “the artist.” However, as Harriet Senie explains it: “Contrary to nearly all published commentary, there is no accurate measure of public response to *Tilted Arc*.” The sources of public response were small (limited to surveys, hearing testimonies, written opinion by those motivated to take action), and only 50



**Figure 21: Another Serra piece recently found languishing in a scrapyards in the Bronx; “to remove the piece is to destroy it” he once said.**

**Image Dolnick, New York Times 2010.**

federal employees out of 10,000 testified at the trial. The sample was small but big enough to obscure the challenges of defining whom the “public” actually was.

According to Deutsche, anti-intellectual and populist rhetoric was used to give democratic legitimacy to an authoritarian campaign against critical art and theory.<sup>70</sup> The case revealed the reality that definitions of the public, and public space, were anything but a given, though they were terms often presented as “self-evident.” On the day of the sculpture’s dismantling, Diamond rejoiced that: “This is a day for the city to rejoice because now the plaza returns rightfully to the people.”<sup>71</sup> The value judgment was that the art interfered with “public use of the plaza,” and that the “public” was necessarily a unified group adhering to a universal set of principles.

Tom Finkelpearl argues that no matter what the concrete evidence (or lack thereof), the fact is that one would have been hard-pressed to find an employee in the surrounding buildings who liked the

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<sup>70</sup> Deutsche, “*Tilted Arc* and the Uses of Democracy,” 165.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

piece.<sup>72</sup> The hearing became a media spectacle, with 122 people speaking in favor of keeping the sculpture (predominantly coming from the art world), and 58 in favor of removal. Opponents to the piece repeatedly mentioned art-world elitism and the imposition of taste. In spite of the greater than majority public response to keep the sculpture, the panel voted 4-to-1 to remove it. Diamond's letter to the GSA in Washington focused on the danger the piece created and its propensity for graffiti. Larger urban issues were thus blamed on *Tilted Arc*, with correlation implying causation.

Hell hath no fury like a Serra scorned. Unsurprisingly, he fought vehemently to the end to keep *Tilted Arc* at Federal Plaza. According to Dale Lanzone, he never stood a chance. In reaction to the impending hearing, Serra sent out pleas to the art world asking them to write Diamond in protest.

The response to *Tilted Arc*'s dismantling was of course mixed, but the art community, broadly speaking, was horrified. Even though critics such as Grace Glueck, architecture critic for the New York Times, had early on called *Tilted Arc* "the ugliest outdoor work of art

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<sup>72</sup> Interview with Tom Finkelparl, Director of the Queens Museum of Art, (11/5/2010).

in the city," very few people in the art world thought that is should go; issues such as freedom of speech, contractual obligation and flawed legal procedures were often raised.

Arthur Danto, long-term art critic for the *Nation*, was an exception. He wrote:

The public has an interest in the existence of museums but it also has an interest in not having all of its open spaces treated as though they were museums, in which esthetic i.e. private interests rightly dominate. The delicate architectural siting of *Tilted Arc* in Federal Plaza ignores the human realities of the place. Were he not blind to everything but the esthetic, Serra could learn something about human orientation to space and place. Standing where it does, *Tilted Arc* is the metal grin of the art world having bitten off a piece of the public world, which it means to hold in its teeth forever, the public be damned<sup>73</sup>

The values expressed in *Tilted Arc* are primarily Serra's, or perhaps more generously speaking, those of the art community of the time. No matter what nods are made to universal principles, it is pretty clear that Serra's antiauthoritarian standpoint (whose goal was to create a "behavioral autocracy" according to Patricia C. Phillips<sup>74</sup>) was not echoed by the legions of surrounding government

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<sup>73</sup> Danto, *The State-Of-The-Art*.

<sup>74</sup> Phillips, "Forum: Something There Is That Doesn't Love a Wall."

employees. That *Tilted Arc* could potentially be highly offensive to local government workers (many of whom were already on the defensive in light of the socio-politics of the era) was of no concern to Serra.

*Tilted Arc* is an extreme case of a hulking, interrogative and inaccessible work in a highly charged political public sphere, yet it reveals the difficulties of defining “the public” or “audience” for an artwork. The obvious first choice is the people who live and work full-time in an area. What about the tourists and the daily visitors coming to local offices, or the larger public interested in art itself and less concerned with its context? The tendency after *Tilted Arc* was to aim for work that would please all possible audiences. An impossible task, much public art became watered-down, innocuous and assuredly uncontroversial.

Ironically, this move did nothing to help the case for permanent public art. Audiences are less engaged than ever before, as public art has become no more noticeable than the next Starbucks or Gap store along the route between one destination and another. Permanent public art, if valued at all, is recognized for its value as a commodity and real estate enhancer, not for its social or cultural

value. These are the developments that have occurred in the twenty years since *Tilted Arc* was dismantled. Art and artists can no longer be valued for their status as icons alone. My optimism is reserved for the new possible meanings of “public art,” and the producers, artists and urban planners who recognize this.

### ***ANACHRONISMS***

*Tilted Arc* was divorced from other growing tendencies in art, a reality that would also largely contribute to its undoing. Serra was in most ways a classic Modernist,<sup>75</sup> and *Tilted Arc* was the swan song for Modernist public art. Not only did the artist not seek public approval from the beginning, neither did the administrators. It had no pretense toward civic functionalism -- there were no places to sit or flexible routes to navigate its 120-foot length. The project received a significant amount of criticism internally in Serra’s original presentations, and its approval was a bumpy process from the start.

*Tilted Arc* was an anachronism – the wrong kind of art in the wrong place, at the wrong time. For most people, it was an inaccessible and thus offensive, piece of work. Unlike Jean-Claude and Christo’s

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<sup>75</sup> Proven, according to Harriet Senie, by “his belief in the integrity of abstraction and its innate ability to communicate.”



*The Gates* in Central Park twenty years later, which was also essentially “plop art” on a grand scale but widely lauded by all but the most fastidious art critics, *Tilted Arc* was confrontational and non-celebratory.

Richard Serra is the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s greatest sculptor. His artistic principles are enduring and unbending. Such steadfastness, caught in a world of changing political regimes, cultural ethers and popular opinion, is bound to provoke conflict. *Tilted Arc* would never be removed today. In the 1980s, *Tilted Arc* was a sacrificial lamb. Art in public wasn’t meant to provoke or educate, it was meant to beautify and ameliorate. Functionality was paramount.

*Tilted Arc* has the air of a failed artwork. It was prematurely removed, angered both the artist and audiences, and failed to resolve the design flaws of its sited context. Paradoxically, these could also provide *proof* of its success. At the heart of a democracy lies debate. The only drawback is that differing sides stuck, like partisan soldiers, to their opinions. Protecting the inherent human fear of being “wronged,” Serra lashed out for artistic sovereignty, while the piece’s larger audience was defending itself from being flashed a sculptural middle finger.

There has been a tendency – and indeed much of my thesis conforms to such beliefs – to lay blame for most current problems

on the lapsed judgment of the Modernist era. There are opposing voices to consider in such arguments. Juergen Habermas, prominent philosopher and mourner of Modernist principles, issues striking pronouncements in favor of the era’s redefinition of democracy and reason as projects mediated by citizens.<sup>76</sup> For Habermas the Modernist project is incomplete, and the revival of the public sphere is still possible. With the deterioration of the divide between public and private and individuals and the government, Habermas has long argued against totalitarianism and in favor of debate and citizen engagement. His work bolsters the possibility that *Tilted Arc* was a success.

My hope has been that *Tilted Arc* would pinpoint interesting implications for urban design and planning in 2011. Would the piece even be commissioned through GSA channels today? *Tilted Arc* marked the beginning of permanent public art’s predicament, which continues today. The importance of audience engagement,

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<sup>76</sup> Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.

education and consideration are as problematic for making great art as they are for making great cities.

Richard Serra believes that his art speaks for itself. In a show organized by Glenn Weiss and Tom Finkelppearl at the Storefront for Art and Architecture in 1985, a number of artists were asked to suggest alternatives for Federal Plaza if and when *Tilted Arc* was removed. Mierle Ukeles (my next case study) suggested sitting Richard Serra in front of *Tilted Arc* and forcing him to interact with visitors and explain the intentions of the work. To me this offers a simple but perfect bridge between what are still seemingly irreconcilable worlds, the inner landscape of the artist and the outer world of material objects and collective response and understanding.

Art in the public sphere belies a certain responsibility that it is never given the space to adequately fulfill. Art that fulfills the “place-making” criteria of many urban design plans may create spaces that seem more welcoming, pretty and somehow interesting, but never listed is a requirement to make visitors think or question their assumptions. Such disruptions are assumed by most urban planners to unmake places and should be kept within museum walls. I have

yet to see a master plan where public art is given anything but token credit, as a decorative afterthought or as a persuasive device to lull readers into the idea that the plan is positive – the assumption now seems to be: how can art be anything but crowd-pleasing?

The sculpture was meant to be permanent, and was thus held up to architectural standards as well as art historical ones. No one knew whom to blame for the design monstrosity that was Federal Plaza and its buildings. The insult to injury of working for the public sector in the 1980s was to come out for lunch and be required to think and to acknowledge the disordered space. There was nowhere to sit, watch and partake, and although the plaza had never in fact offered that, *Tilted Arc* managed to draw attention to the reality of the situation and amplify it.

*Tilted Arc* scared people. Artists recognized the fragility of their rights, and public officials piled on the regulations and expanded upon approval processes. Artists are rarely equipped to deal with loads of paperwork and urban politics, but architects are used to such processes. Since many architects consider themselves artists anyway, competitions for public art commissions have seen the

number of proposals coming from architects rise substantially since the 1980s.

What was chosen to replace *Tilted Arc* speaks volumes. Martha Schwartz, a prominent landscape designer, was chosen – directly by William Diamond and without any outside consultation – to redesign work for the plaza. The choice of a designer to make the plaza “artful” was in line with larger shifts, as was her choice of sculpture that was also seating (see Figure 21). The ironies beyond the fact that Diamond made no more a democratic act of the choice than he argued as the failing of *Tilted Arc*, but Schwartz’ design is no more easier to navigate than *Tilted Arc* had been, and its shapes are so similar as to be almost eerily mocking. Since its installation, more local workers do in fact use the area to sit around and eat lunch or rest, but in relation to the complaints inveighed against *Tilted Arc*, it does little to solve the issues that had been raised.

The question then becomes: is this a problem? What is the difference between projects created in the public realm by artists versus those of architects and designers? One artist with whom I

spoke was adamant that the difference was marked.<sup>77</sup> Architects design, and artists create art. That architects are regularly overtaking the contributions of artists, whose skill sets are to play, provoke and create new conversations, versed in the language of “necessity”, or utility, may be a great loss.



**Figure 22: Martha Schwartz redesign of Federal Plaza.**

Image [www.marthaschwartz.com](http://www.marthaschwartz.com)

One of the key aims of this thesis has been to ask whether or not the original format for public art – essentially permanent sculptures

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<sup>77</sup> Thom Sokoloski is an artist living in Toronto, Canada. He has done many projects in the public sphere, and in 2007 installed *The Encampment*, a temporary work, on New York’s Roosevelt Island. “The Encampment - Art - Thom Sokoloski - New York Times.”

by artists in public places – has exhausted its relevance in contemporary society. My personal claim is that very few members of the public are actually interested in this kind of work, and it's extremely challenging to change the genre's negative stereotypes ("the turd in the plaza"<sup>78</sup>). So maybe it's time to move on from what is a tired and stagnant art form?

This is not to say that art and artists have no use for the public realm – in fact it's quite the opposite. The transformative potential that artists bring to the public realm is instead undervalued and stagnated by the processes of permanent public art commissioning. As Dale Lanzone pointed out in our interview, public art is subject to the whims of the individuals in power. It is not possible to create a policy that will ensure interesting and successful works are chosen at any given time – art doesn't work like that. What matters is whether or not the person who happens to be making such choices at the time – often someone with little to no understanding of art history – actually can or is willing to devote the time to making the best choices.

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<sup>78</sup> A term originated by James Wines of SITE (Sculpture in the Environment), during various lectures in the 1970s.

If Richard Serra can't beat the complexities and frustrations of urban political processes, then what artist can? I see no foreseeable end to the moribund public art commissioning process that exists within most cities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Temporary public art is the only avenue that allows for the flexibility and agency needed by the majority of artists to function. Let's leave permanent "artistic" work to the architects and find and encourage new modes of using artists in the public sphere.

So where does this leave urban planners? Alongside newly emerging urban planning principles that acknowledge growth and decay, or expansion and contraction, the use of art and artists need to be thrown into the mix from the beginning. Flux is now recognized; cities are not static objects produced by a coterie of "experts." Sometimes I question the very *idea* of permanence in the public sphere. Yet urban planners are still responsible for creating longer-term frameworks within which other disciplines can operate.

Master plans intended to unfold over decades still predominate. Permanent public art commissions are still thrown in for good measure – temporary programs and curators who are adept at navigating changing politics and administrations need to be given

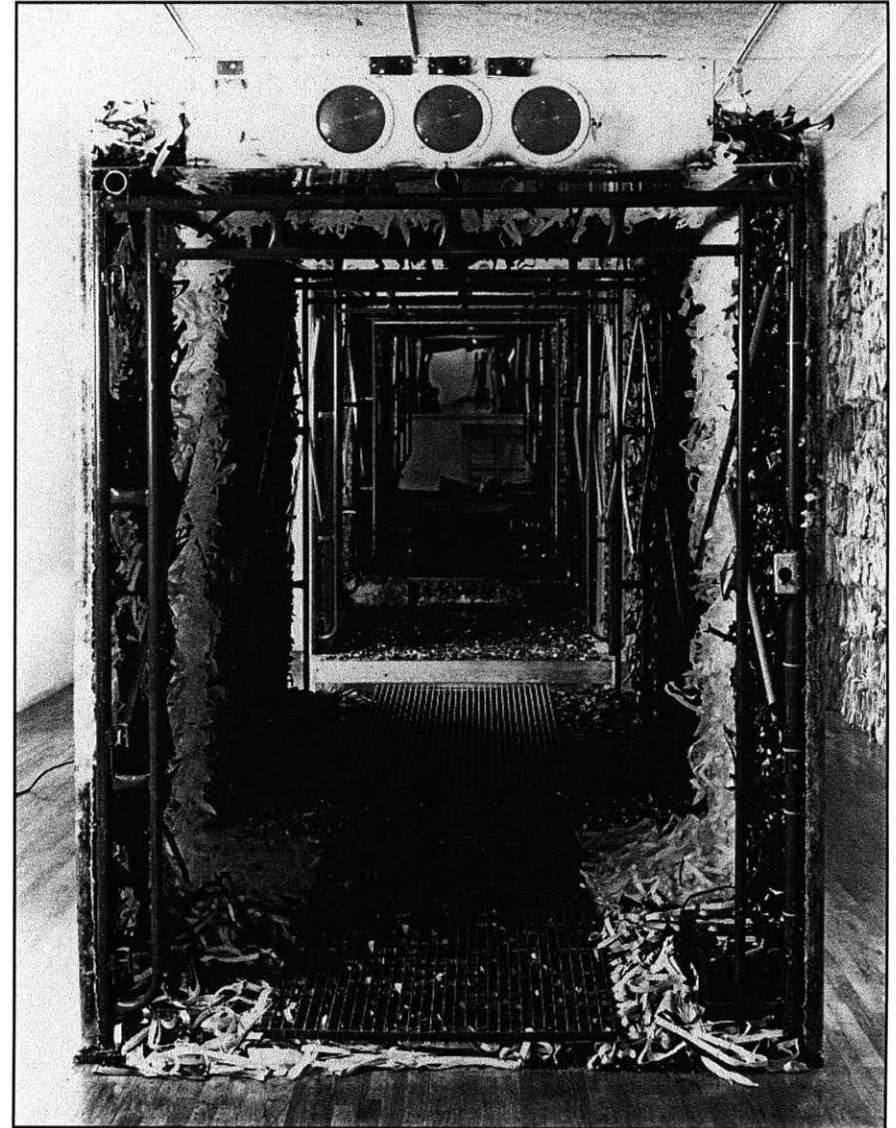
equal consideration. Because it's still impossible to quantify art for art's sake, it will most likely be necessary to continue using economic value as the primary incentive for the inclusion of art in new development. We need to continue looking for ways in which this doesn't solely cater to predominant market forces but encourages robust and diverse interplays between people and the cities within which they live. *Tilted Arc* suggests a starting point from which such conversations can emerge.

# CHAPTER IV:

**MIERLE**

**LADERMAN**

**UKELES**



**Figure 23: Ukeles' *Flow City*. Image *Dispossessed Installations* 1992.**

Mierle Laderman Ukeles is the most prolific and influential artist you've never heard of. In a show hosted by the Storefront for Art and Architecture in 1985 entitled "After Tilted Arc," a number of people, many of whom were artists, were asked to develop a project for Federal Plaza once *Tilted Arc* was removed.<sup>79</sup> Since this was ominously before a final decision had even been made, Ukeles proposed that Serra sit in front of the piece for periods at a time, answering questions posed to him by the public. His unwillingness to engage in a dialogue, she believed, was the only reason that the piece failed. As a piece of sculpture it succeeded, but as public art, it was unsustainable.

Although she began her career in the 1960s and was ushered into the realm of art under the same heroes that Serra was – earth and land artists such as Robert Smithson, Nancy Holt and Robert Morris and abstract expressionists such as Jackson Pollock – Ukeles' legacy rests in her retaliation against the autonomous nature of art under Modernism. Instead, Ukeles has spent decades advocating the values of interconnectedness and insisting on the dynamic, co-creation of society. As Deutsche would argue in *Evictions*, cities are

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<sup>79</sup> Glenn Weiss (Times Square Alliance) and Tom Finkelpearl (Queens Museum of Art) were co-curators of the show.

not stagnant organisms created and put in place by "experts."<sup>80</sup> Ukeles's work is the embodiment of the belief that cities are dynamic, co-created, "living entities."

I include the work of Mierle Laderman Ukeles because the conflation of the roles of art and urban management that she has long championed is in line, at least conceptually, with my argument in favor of an enhanced dialogue between the two fields. She has stated her desire to "make an art that aims to create a new language."<sup>81</sup> In many ways, Ukeles's art *is* urban planning.

Ukeles has been married to an urban planner, Jack Ukeles, since the 1960s. Jack Ukeles had been the Deputy Director for Comprehensive Planning in the NYC Planning Department in the 1960s, and proposed that urban planning was about two things: maintenance and development. While Mierle Laderman Ukeles had always considered herself as an artist aligned with the latter (or in artspeak, part of the avant-garde), in conversations with her husband and as she was exposed as a visitor in planning meetings to the depth of urban knowledge that planners possessed, she found

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<sup>80</sup> Deutsche, *Evictions*.

<sup>81</sup> Finkelpearl, *Dialogues in Public Art*.

that her ideas continued to transform, as did her relationship to the artistic ego. Mierle Laderman Ukeles attributes her alignment with maintenance in large part to the ideas exposed to her through her husband Jack Ukeles's work.

Ukeles's work is vastly different from the other three case studies in a number of ways, but her ideas about the potential of art in civic space share similarly utopic goals. In methodology, however, her de-emphasis on the production of objects and artistic autonomy differentiate her work from nearly all traditionally held ideas of public art. The other three case studies arguably belong to a Modernist model; one that may have exhausted its relevance and/or ability to connect with audiences, at least in a place like New York City. Ukeles is an artist who has always been working ahead of her time, but her approach has finally come to fruition in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## THE STORY

Toward the end of art school, Ukeles found herself growing frustrated with the contemporary art world and its politics. She quit Pratt because she couldn't stand its "sickening tone," and soon thereafter became pregnant and had a child. While trying to juggle

motherhood with being an artist, Ukeles became angry at what she saw as capitalist society's unnecessary and antagonistic division between art and life. An ardent feminist, Ukeles found her new role as mother, or maintainer, as diametrically opposed to how she was expected to act as an artist, or maker of objects. She made her break official by writing (in one furious sitting) a manifesto entitled "Maintenance Art – Proposal for an Exhibition" in 1969.

The manifesto lambasted the "phoniness" of avant-garde art; the autonomy, individualism and isolationism that were linked to the mythology surrounding the modern artist were false. Ukeles argued instead for the merits of mutual dependency, and against the superficiality of the public/private divide.<sup>82</sup> Instead of the avant-garde's "make it new," she championed us to "maintain it!"

Ukeles went on to develop a series of performances to accompany her exhibits, in which she enacted repetitive janitorial tasks, or household chores, among other acts that she believed were devalued in society. In performing such acts as a maintenance

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<sup>82</sup> In part I she correlates the death vs. life instinct (Freud) with work (avant-garde vs. maintenance), political philosophy (individuality vs. unification) and urban planning (development vs. maintenance). (Wadsworth Atheneum, "Mierle Laderman Ukeles.")



system she created “a literal art of work existing in real time.”<sup>83</sup>

From her manifesto:

Development: pure individual creation; the new;  
change; progress; advance; excitement; flight or fleeing.  
Maintenance: Keep the dust off the pure individual  
creation; preserve the new; sustain the change; protect  
progress; defend and prolong the advance; renew the  
excitement; repeat the flight.<sup>84</sup>

In 1976, Ukeles was asked to be part of a show organized by the downtown branch of the Whitney Museum of Art. The skyscraper setting of the downtown location was a boon for Ukeles, as it gave her the opportunity to engage (by also doing building maintenance work herself) with 300+ maintenance workers in the building. She wrote letters asking “ them to select one hour of their regular work, and think of that work, that one hour, as art. It was completely up to them if they wanted to do this or not. Opening up the power to choose and power to name was critical.”<sup>85</sup> She called the piece *I Make Maintenance Art One Hour Every Day*, and took photographs of the individuals who had agreed to participate – which was the majority of the building staff – to post on the exhibition walls.

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<sup>83</sup> Morgan, “Touch Sanitation: Mierle Laderman Ukeles.”

<sup>84</sup> Molesworth, “House Work and Art Work.”

<sup>85</sup> Finkelpearl, *Dialogues in Public Art*.

Reviewer David Bourdon made a quip about the show that inspired Ukeles to commit to her work in a whole new, and fully entrenched way. He joked that, in light of the recent recession, and funding cuts to the Department of Sanitation, the department should consider its work art and apply for grants from the NEA. Ukeles sent the review to the Commissioner of the agency, and got a phone call from him shortly thereafter asking if she’d like to “(make) art with 10,000 people?”<sup>86</sup> Ukeles jumped at the chance and landed herself within the Department of Sanitation (now the DSNY) as its official Artist-in-Residence. She has had an office there since 1977, and has been actively engaged with the entire staff for the last thirty-three years.

Ukeles spent her first year in residence getting to know the staff, developing an understanding of both the history of waste management in New York and the organizational structure of the Department of Sanitation in particular. She got to know the employees, went out on shifts with them, performed research in the archive, and most importantly, showed up every day. Although her performances are temporary, the fact that many are ongoing gives her work the quality of living permanent public art. Since her role has never been funded by the department or clearly defined,

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

Ukeles has always had the agency to create her own ways of working, a slippery position whose nature she relishes.<sup>87</sup>

Ukeles' first large-scale performance with the Department of Sanitation was *Touch Sanitation*, completed in June 1980. Perhaps her best-known work, the performance lasted eleven months and involved 8,500+ workers in the agency. In response to the recent fiscal crisis and massive snowstorm of 1978 that had crippled New York, sanitation workers had been both cheered and then lambasted for their inability to keep up with the inordinate amount of waste created. There was no sympathy for the fact that the department had been facing severe funding cuts for the previous few years. Ukeles was horrified at the treatment the men were receiving from the public, and developed her intention to ameliorate the effects by shaking hands with every worker and saying "Thank you for keeping New York City alive."

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<sup>87</sup> In our interview Ukeles described the paradoxical advantages of being an artist in a city agency. On the one hand, no one really knows or understands what she is doing so she can sort of slip into the margins and do her own thing, but on the other hand, it can quickly become an impotent position.



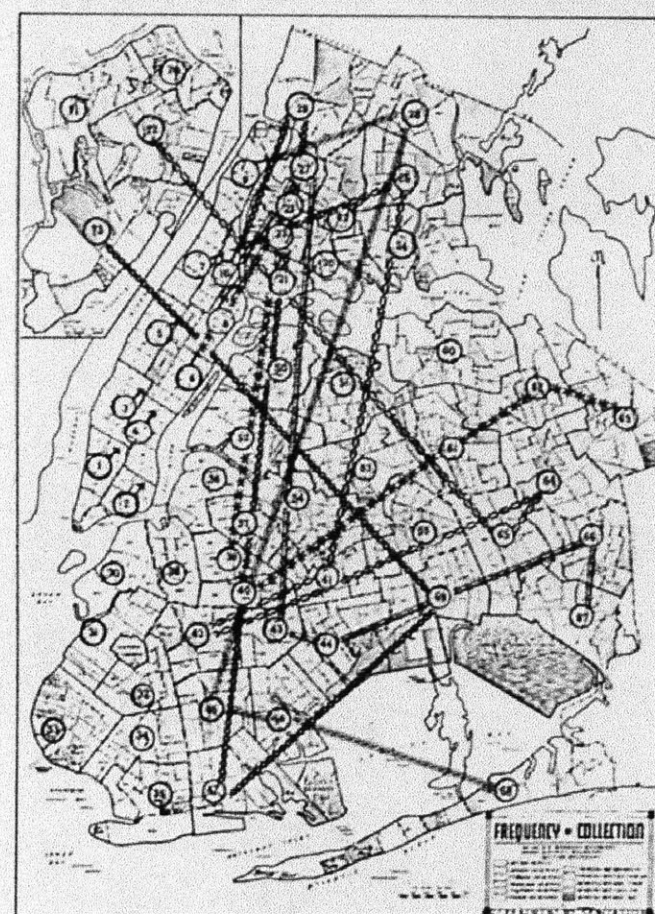
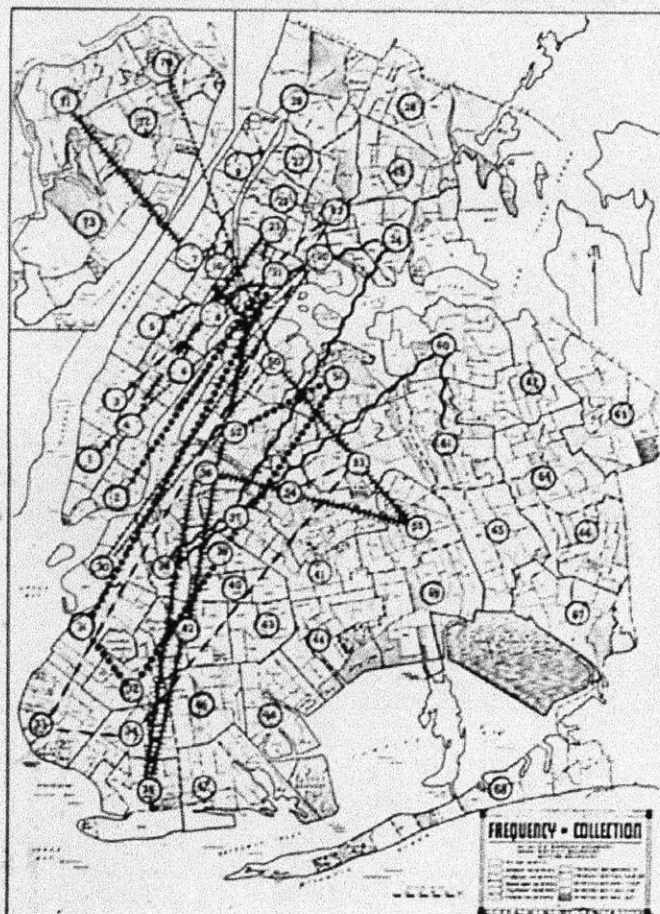
**Figure 24: Ukeles enacting *Touch Sanitation*.**

**Image courtesy Ronald Feldman Gallery**

Organizing a project that would allow her to meet 8,500 workers across the five boroughs was complicated and more time consuming than she had anticipated – eleven months of round-the-clock work as opposed to three. She spent a significant amount of time designing an elaborate mapping system for the piece, modeled after the same systems the department used to track garbage for pick-up. She called the routes “sweeps.”

Key to Ukeles's work is her collaborative process. Unlike *Tilted Arc*, which was delivered “from above” with no notice, Ukeles has

SWEEP 1		SWEEP 2		SWEEP 3		SWEEP 4		SWEEP 5		SWEEP 6		SWEEP 7		SWEEP 8		SWEEP 9		SWEEP 10	
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MAN.	1	MAN.	2	MAN.	3	MAN.	4	MAN.	5	MAN.	6	MAN.	7	MAN.	8	MAN.	9	MAN.	10
BX.	20	BX.	21	BX.	22	BX.	23	BX.	24	BX.	25	BX.	26	BX.	27	BX.	28	BX.	29
BKLYN.	30	BKLYN.	31+32	BKLYN.	33+34	BKLYN.	35+36	BKLYN.	37+38	BKLYN.	39+40	BKLYN.	41+42	BKLYN.	43+44	BKLYN.	45+46	BKLYN.	47
QNS.	50	QNS.	51+52	QNS.	53+54	QNS.	55	QNS.	56+61	QNS.	62+63	QNS.	64+65	QNS.	66+67	QNS.	68	QNS.	69
S.I.	70	S.I.	---	S.I.	---	S.I.	71	S.I.	---	S.I.	---	S.I.	72	S.I.	---	S.I.	---	S.I.	73



always been very conscientious about informing and conversing with participants from the inception of her projects. When she began *Touch Sanitation*, she wrote a letter to the workers.

I'm creating a huge artwork called TOUCH SANITATION about and with you, the men of the Department. All of you. Not just a few sanmen or officers, or one district, or one incinerator, or one landfill. That's not the story here. New York City Sanitation is the major leagues, and I want to "picture" the entire mind-bending operation."<sup>88</sup>

Ukeles was keen to show that disposing trash and dealing with it are all part of one cycle; work is part of both public and private life. If sanitation workers are "garbage men," then we are all "garbage people." Negative stereotypes had been established about a particular group of people (in no small part due to the media) and it had become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Working conditions were dismal (one toilet for fifty workers in one instance) and low morale was pervasive. Sanitation workers felt that they were invisible, if not repellent. Mark Feldman argues:

**Figure 25: Ukeles' "sweep" maps from *Touch Sanitation*.**

**Courtesy Ronald Feldman Gallery.**

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<sup>88</sup> Finkelpearl, *Dialogues in Public Art*.

The gesture of shaking hands with all 8,500 New York City sanitation workers becomes a sort of phenomenological refutation of the invisible hand (Adam Smith) of neoliberal economics, replacing abstract human relations with the dirty but human touch of the hand."<sup>89</sup>

By shaking their hands, Ukeles was subverting a gesture that had symbolic value within capitalism; instead she turned the gesture into a symbol of social support and shared mutual interest.

In 1984, after five years in the Department, Ukeles folded her work into a multifaceted exhibition entitled the *Touch Sanitation Show*. Complex in scale and scope, it included a large exhibit at the Fifty-Ninth Street Sanitation Department station, a ballet performance on a "garbage barge" on the Hudson River, an exhibit about the environment at the Ronald Feldman gallery (who represents her), and a nearly 200-person performance on Mercer Street in SoHo called *Cleansing the Bad Names*.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Feldman, "Inside the Sanitation System: Mierle Ukeles, Urban Ecology, and the Social Circulation of Garbage."

<sup>90</sup> In this performance Ukeles's collected (by asking the workers themselves) dozens of rude names and expletives that had been aimed at sanitation workers in the city. She then wrote them all over the exterior of the Feldman Gallery and had approximately 190 people of all different

She believed that by dividing the show into two locations – one a traditional art space and the other at a sanitation facility – she was reflecting the reality of the existing division. This time her audience extended beyond sanitation workers. She wrote a new manifesto to accompany the show, aimed directly at the art world and New York residents. It was called “Sanitation Manifesto! *Why Sanitation Can Be Used As A Model for Public Art.*” With a more thorough understanding of the inner workings of a municipal maintenance agency, Ukeles called for visitors and residents to “renew our commitment to democracy and urban culture by acknowledging our waste and caring for it intelligently.”<sup>91</sup>

*Touch Sanitation Show* was co-produced by Creative Time. Ukeles says it took four years to raise money and get permissions, a bureaucratic process that most artists would most likely not choose to endure. At the time, Ukeles found the process interesting and part of the work itself.

Looking back on the show fifteen years later (1999), Ukeles said:

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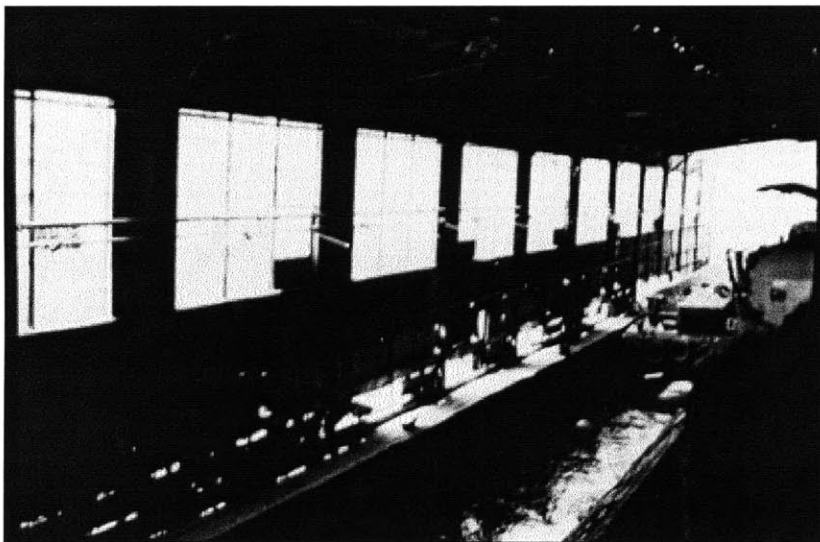
professions wipe out the bad names one by one. It was a healing gesture, and one that was reported as having a tremendous psychological effect in tandem with her other projects at the DSNY.

<sup>91</sup> Wadsworth Atheneum, “Mierle Laderman Ukeles.”

I am amazed at the level of cooperation, participation, and interaction I got from every single layer, office, bureau, division of an entire city agency- who were not known before as contemporary art specialists. For example, at the transfer station, for a five-week show, to counter municipal nervousness about allowing the public into an old, dangerous workplace, they erected a waist-high steel fence along the 350-foot tipping floor. Three kinds of electricians-automotive, in-house, exterior- wired the station for sound. Everyone pitched in: people from different, sometimes competitive parts of the department itself, to completely unrelated people. A private commercial gallery turned itself inside out, literally, to become a public art installation with sanitation trades working next to sanitation workers working next to gallery preparators. We just did it.

Mierle Laderman Ukeles began working on what was meant to be the “permanent” project Flow City in 1983. Sited on the Hudson River at the 59th Street marine transfer station (a 65,000 square foot holding station for garbage pre-barge and pre-landfill), the intentions behind Flow City were again to bring hitherto hidden, private processes out into public view. The visitor space had three main, interlocking, components: a 248-foot “Passage Ramp” facing east that led into the facility, the “Glass Bridge” with a beautiful panoramic view of the city on one side and on the other side a view of waste and recycling processes, and a multimedia wall of video monitors that showed live camera images of waste sites (i.e. the

Fresh Kills Landfill). Zoning regulations were adapted in 1983 – for the first time in New York’s municipal history – to allow public access to the previously restricted workplace.<sup>92</sup>



**Figure 26: Ukeles' *Flow City*. Image courtesy Ronald Feldman Gallery.**

Unfortunately, *Flow City* was never realized beyond some of the initial structural installations. Various factors were at play, including a lack of funding and administrative support. Ukeles’s had to contend with making the whole thing happen on her own, which for a permanent project is too much for any one individual to take on.

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<sup>92</sup> From our interview 12.14.2010

The nail in the proverbial coffin was the closing of Fresh Kills Landfill on Staten Island, which put the marine transfer station into a holding pattern.

As a semi-employee herself (at least as a long-time fixture, if not salaried staff with fixed responsibilities), Ukeles occupies an intricate middle ground between independent artist and ensconced member of the DSNY. Tom Finkelpearl explains that when he was Director of New York City’s Percent-for-Art program he met many sanitation workers, all of whom knew Ukeles personally. Finkelpearl wrote of a typical reaction, this one from a contract officer who had been at the agency for over thirty years:

When Ukeles’s name came up, the officer chuckled, and said that she was a "pain in the ass" who had put him through a lot of extra work. "But seriously," he said, "she's really a dynamic lady. Do you know she took the time to meet every sanitation worker when she came on board?" His attitude was one of amused bewilderment mixed with appreciation for what she had done for the agency and its workers.<sup>93</sup>

Ukeles admitted that in the beginning she was tested by the workers. They wondered if she was secretly working for the owners

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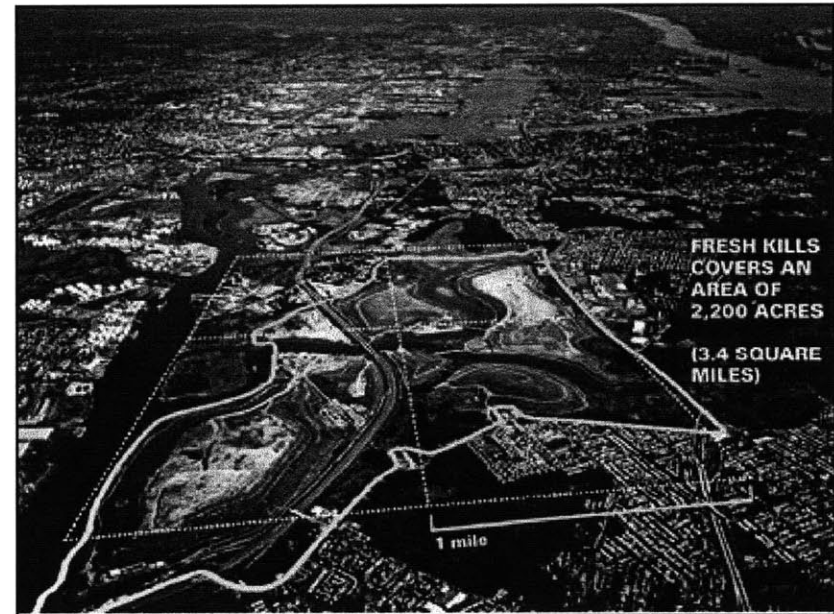
<sup>93</sup> Finkelpearl, *Dialogues in Public Art*.

of the building or the unions, or working as an undercover immigration agent (as many had shaky status). She insists that what ultimately worked was that she adopted their work patterns and just kept showing up. Her long-term engagement with the Department is in contrast to the tendencies that Lippard is concerned about in *The Lure of the Local*. Ukeles hasn't had to collect frequent flyer miles to attest to her artistic credibility. She hasn't found herself constantly in a state of being in "The Wrong Place."<sup>94</sup> She has consistently claimed that the community for her art is "all New Yorkers," and that her site is the city of New York in its entirety.

### **CURRENT**

1989 Ukeles was commissioned by the Percent-for-Art program to be the artist for the redevelopment of the Fresh Kills Landfill on Staten Island. Originally she worked on master plans with the landscape architecture firm SWA who said of the project in 1990: "It's not an easy task... the mass moves... let carbon and methane gas escape. It's a monster."

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**Figure 27: Fresh Kills aerial from Field Operations proposal**

SWA was one of many firms to take on aspects of Fresh Kills before an international competition was held in 1999. James Corner's firm Field Operations won the highly competitive and prestigious contract, and is now the landscape architect for Fresh Kills. Although Ukeles was asked to step aside from deliberations in the final short-listed stage, she was insistent that she be involved right from the outset, especially as she had involved in the project for over ten years by then. She had 18 proposals prepared from years of work, and was brought into the conversations early on.

Fresh Kills, at 3,000 acres, is the world's largest manmade structure. As the project is still in development, it would be premature to attempt a thorough analysis, but in many ways the project represents the culmination of Ukeles's years of work. As at *Flow City*, Ukeles is eager to bring visitors into the project, not reinforce a separation of the individual from his or her environment. She also has an opportunity to reveal the hidden processes that go into making a city tick, as well as emphasize the ecological underpinnings that sustain us. The project has a thirty-year development lifespan, but Ukeles's states that for her the work is not public until 1 million people have visited it.

The project also points to the disadvantages of demarcated professional boundaries. Tim Collins and Reiko Goto, two artists involved in another landfill reclamation project, described its relation to art:

The work and the inquiry is as informed by practices outside the art as from within. The interdisciplinary intention is to mitigate the affected environment and the values that radiate outward from the experience of post-industrial place. It is in the act of reclamation that the aesthetic experience is created. Post-industrial environments are by nature complex systems. Reclamation projects involve inquiry and action that can

occupy a roomful of disciplines. At the same time, the specificity of inquiry that is illustrated by the "roomful" of individuals prohibits individual understanding. It is our belief that the existing academic disciplines are too narrowly defined in terms of interest, knowledge and expertise, creating boundaries that do not reflect the complexity or realities of natural processes. It is only through collective interdisciplinary inquiry and discourse that complex systems can be perceived.<sup>95</sup>

The constrictive nature of the "specialist" model, reinforced by the hyper-professionalization of neoliberal society, is exposed in Ukeles's work as arbitrary, if not outright detrimental. Fresh Kills is the most recent iteration of her belief that the hegemonic development of professional silos hinders the artistic process.

## THE SIGNIFICANCE

The performatory and ephemeral, social and relational, co-created and multivalent elements that Ukeles has long advocated are now reflected in the productive process of the most progressive artists and producers working in the public realm today. While traditional notions of public art – permanent sculptures in public places – remains the global norm, there are increasing numbers of artists and producers of art who believe that alternative modes of practice

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<sup>95</sup> Collins and Goto, "Urban Reclamation."



hold the true potential for the transformation of urban consciousness.

*Key to the City*, the Creative Time project mentioned in the introduction, attracted thousands of participants over the course of three weeks. The project was fun and exploratory. It invited participants to discover parts of New York City by imbuing a sense of shared ownership. By discovering one or many of 24 spots across the 24 boroughs, participants were able to chart their own adventure without feeling the weight of a curatorial hand, although, of course, to a large extent this was actually as present as at any gallery show.

The link to Ukeles's work is that both approaches consider the city as a system of interconnected histories and present workings. The work "opens up" the city rather than comments abstractly on some aspect of it.

In the mid-1980s Ukeles tried to replicate her own artist-in-residence model across the city. She believed that city agencies held a wealth of material for artists, both material and conceptual, and that it was a missed opportunity on both sides that this was



**Figure 28: Ukeles *Landfill Cross Section* (1980).**

***Image Dispossessed Installations 2008.***

such a hard sell. Battling hyper-professionalization in a city like New York is an enormous challenge. As a dual degree candidate in both the M.Arch (architecture) and M.C.P. (urban planning) departments at M.I.T., I was constantly surprised at the divisions between two professions that essentially operate in the same field. No one wants to cede territory, and the challenges that Ukeles has faced reveal how such professional silos are replicated and reinforced throughout society.

The UK's Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA) launched a program in 2002 called "Professional Values for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century."<sup>96</sup> The key concern was whether "old" professions such as law, medicine and architecture were still valid in training and execution amidst a society of "new" professions that valued interdisciplinarity, openness and flexibility. The aim was to find a new model that recognized the values of both (i.e. discipline, service ethic and excellence for the "old," and refreshed and adaptive attitudes in the "new"), and to foster conversations that would break down some of the superfluous professional walls. It is clear that there is a lot of

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<sup>96</sup> "RSA - Home."

fear and conservatism within a large number of professions, and urban planning and the art world are no exceptions.

Not only does her work suggest breaking down 'side-to-side' professional walls, it also suggests that conservative boundaries between inside and outside, and up and down, should erode. Helen Molesworth argued, in an essay comparing several feminist artists:

Ukeles's work... may be the most explicit in its utopian dimension, its literalness a demand beyond "equal time equal pay" or the "personal is political," for hers is a world where maintenance labor is equal in value to artistic labor – a proposition that would require a radically different organization of the public and private spheres<sup>97</sup>

Ukeles believes that change is possible, not from top-down actions like those of Moses or LeCorbusier, but as an evolutionary process, if not an immediately revolutionary one.<sup>98</sup> Rather than the idea that garbage is somehow outside of or hidden from the clean geometries of the "well-managed city," she argues for the union of processes on the "outside" and the "inside." Ukeles believes in the value of

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<sup>97</sup> Molesworth, "House Work and Art Work."

<sup>98</sup> Feldman, "Inside the Sanitation System: Mierle Ukeles, Urban Ecology, and the Social Circulation of Garbage."

working within the constraints of the urban environment as an artist and pushing for change to happen from within, and “as part of.”

This idea suggests one of the glaring challenges facing public art – the conservative role long-held for artists in the urban realm. Current urban planning protocols reinforce the idea that artists operate separately, or adjacently, to other city processes. In contrast to a city like Seattle, where artists have been brought into development processes early on for decades, in New York City artist voices are rarely brought in from the beginning. This makes last-minute, late art additions, seem even less streamlined and integrated. Perhaps art works best as an idea, or way of working, as opposed to an object.

Since Ukeles has been working with the Department of Sanitation (DSNY) since the late 1970s, she has a well-developed understanding of art and urban bureaucracy. Her work also reflects the potential of an idea that was regularly repeated to me in interviews: artists ought to be brought in earlier on than they regularly are, be given more agency, and be recognized as professionals with a particular set of skills and ways of thinking.

Ukeles’ emphasis on education is clearly antithetical to installing a sculpture in a plaza overnight. At the core of Ukeles’s work is the desire to develop environments of learning and community collaboration. Viewers are intended to become participants and recognize their own responsibility, as political agents, to reconceptualize urban ecological systems. As Patti Phillips writes:

By creating a point of access, Ukeles enables members of the public to make more incisive connections with the physical dimensions of their urban and natural worlds. Both the city and the river are seen as relational; *Flow City* serves as the suture that draws the extremes of the natural-culture dialectic into visible coexistence.<sup>99</sup>

Ukeles has a very consistent goal in her educational process that goes beyond accepting responsibility and learning as a one-way process: visitors to her art pieces are meant to engage with the projects on a visceral level, feeling the educational component as a bodily and almost spiritual experience, and thus the being becomes the knowing, the experience becomes the art.

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<sup>99</sup> Phillips, “Maintenance Activity: Creating a climate for change.”

## ***ANACHRONISMS***

Although anecdotal, everyone whom I interviewed for this thesis voiced enthusiasm and respect for the work and values held by Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Although there is plenty of press coverage of her projects over the years, it would be misleading to try to generalize some sort of overall critical response to her work. As with most public art projects, but perhaps even pushing that boundary further, Ukeles's work doesn't fit neatly into critical assessment or art reviews. The fact that there was a very positive and excited response to my inclusion of Ukeles's work by so many arts professionals (I think it's safe to say beyond that of any of the other case studies), makes me think that as an audience maybe we are only just catching up with Ukeles's ideas, though we're excited about their indefinable potential.

I find that the work of Mierle Laderman Ukeles offers the most exciting possibilities for transforming the relationship of public art and urban planning. In some ways, the fact that she directly engages with urban bureaucratic processes makes this is an obvious finding, but her work also has more subtle conceptual lessons and insights that I believe have much to offer the field of urban planning.

When I interviewed Ukeles in her office she seemed genuinely thrilled that what has essentially been her life's work as an artist was being reflected in a thesis within an urban planning department. She called the motivations behind my thesis "a great idea," and also warned that answering the questions I'd written would take a lifetime, or even in the short-term open up a whole can of worms for a thesis nearing the completion stage. Five hours later, caveats had been abandoned.

*What follows is the document that I sent to Ukeles before our interview. I have attempted to summarize her answers to the questions afterwards.*

## **MIERLE UKELES (12.14.2010)**

My thesis in brief: I am writing about the relationship between public art and urban planning in New York from 1979 to 2005. The research focus is on the use of public art as a cultural and urban policy tool (incl. urban development), and as a participatory and/or community-driven practice. I am trying to understand how urban planners and artists might be able to work together in more effective and interesting ways, given the seeming hyperprofessionalization of these two fields. I am looking for the overlaps and discontinuities (gaps between) of the two fields in the hopes that such an understanding will reveal “natural” areas that can be nurtured and/or improved upon. Believing that at the root of each field is a shared goal (making interesting, democratic and just cities), I have sought to examine a handful of case studies (yours included) which might illuminate some of the challenges and opportunities revealed by such an effort.

- Please explain to me your views on the role of urban planning (in New York in particular).
- What have you witnessed as some of the primary changes in city planning during your 30 years with the Department of Sanitation?
- What do you and your husband agree on and not agree on (in your roles as planner and artist)?
- Do you consider urban planning mostly as a conceptual problem or also a practical one?
- Would you like to see your role within the DOS replicated in other city agencies by other artists?
- Does your role at DOS reflect a belief in the power of art to subvert traditional top-down paradigms or is it more of an effort to subvert art’s supposed autonomy?
- What do you believe to be some of the major challenges facing the idea of artists and urban managers (i.e. planners, administrators) working together?
- How do you consider the divide between art in the “art world” and art in the public sphere? Have your views on the bifurcation of the roles of artist/mother changed much since the 1970s?
- What are your views on site? Tangentially, do you think the artist-as-global-nomad model is problematic?
- Do you believe there is such a thing as a failed public artwork? If so, what are the criteria?
- What can art uniquely do (paraphrasing P. Phillips) in a city like New York? Why do you believe in it?
- Funding/Permitting – (i.e. Touch Sanitation) What is the bureaucratic process like and when do you find it a major hindrance?

After skimming the questions, Ukeles confirmed that I had clearly done my research and was asking some very important questions, many of which have consumed her for the entirety of her career. Regarding urban planning and its changes in the last thirty years, Ukeles was keen to point out that her view of city processes was as an artist, and was therefore highly subjective. She stated an admiration of the expertise of the majority of the people whom she had known at the DSNY, while also seeming like a true public employee when bemoaning the deteriorating facilities and lack of proper services and funding.

Ukeles reiterated that yes she has long wanted to see her role replicated within other city agencies, and still believes that such a development would be a very powerful idea. As she showed walked me past hundreds of files of projects, many of them unrealized due to her complicated choice of canvas (a bureaucratic urban institution), Ukeles voiced a certain exhaustion at her initial enthusiasm for the process of battling and fighting to explain the relevance of every possible project.

Ukeles used to take as much pleasure in the process as the product, but those days have long passed. As we toured the rooms devoted

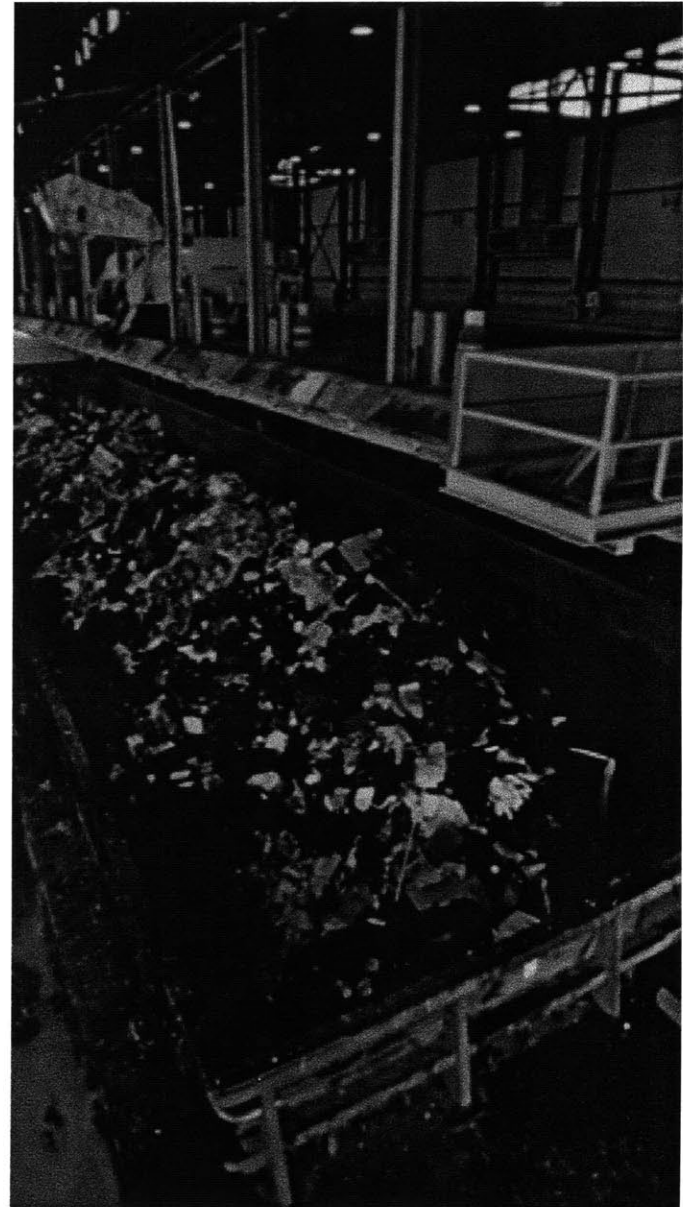
to her remarkably archived decades of work, she explained how firmly she used to believe that the process of navigating bureaucracy was art itself. Is it possible that this interest was another form of artistic fetishization rather than a desire stemming from the desire to initiate real change? While I retain this skepticism for many artists' engagement with urban politics (a question that will resurface in the later chapter on *The Gates*), there's something about Ukeles' enthusiasm, and the genuinely respectful and interested way that she interacted with everyone we met in the DSNY, that made this skeptical possibility wear thin. Perhaps after decades of fighting, at a certain age one just wants to see some ideas materialize.

I believe that Mierle Laderman Ukeles is as much an urban planner as an artist. Her training and skills are what differentiate her from most urban planners, though I don't think her approach needs to be viewed as such an unorthodox concept. Ukeles takes the long view. Her commitment to a set of ideas has been unwavering, which can also be said for both Serra and the Christos. Like any artist, Ukeles insists on retaining a degree of artistic autonomy. Is this the element most at odds with urban planning as it currently stands? The autonomy of urban planning is what got the profession in

trouble in the first place, but it also seems to play a large part in its central dilemmas today. At best, urban planning is as much about dialogue as it is solutions. At worst, it is a mix of efforts watered down and/or stagnated in the unfortunate side effects of the democratic process.

What Ukeles also learned from her ongoing challenges with New York's conservative political – and more recently, cultural – landscape, is that artists require support. Financial, administrative and intellectual backing for artists and their projects are fundamentally lacking. Although this may seem obvious, it's worth pointing out that there is no shortage of ideas and/or visions for transformation, what's missing is the logistic weight to back them up. Urban planners have those skills and resources, as well as the flexibility required to manage long-term projects amidst administrative and political change. What will it take to instigate cooperation between artists and urban planners on a broad scale?

**Figure 29: Ukeles *Touch Sanitation*. Image courtesy Ronald Feldman Gallery.**



# CHAPTER V: METRONOME





In 2002 the *New York Times* City section asked readers to nominate a piece of public art they'd like to "see consigned to the dustbin." Proving exceptionally popular was *Metronome*, a 100-by-60-foot sculpture installed on a building wall on the southern side of Union Square. Commissioned by private real estate developer The Related Companies in December 1996, *Metronome* was offered as a "gift to the city." At an eventual ballooned cost of nearly \$3 million,<sup>100</sup> the public artwork is the most expensive in the city's history. Kristin Jones, one half of the artist team Jones/Ginzel who were the artists of *Metronome* laments that it is the "most unloved piece of art in the city."<sup>101</sup>

*Metronome* points to some of the challenges of creating permanent art in the public sphere. It is a conservative project that aspires to universality, the widespread (and seemingly justifiable) criteria for most work in this vein. As such it begs the question, how could a project vetted through several selection panels, including top players in New York's urban policy and built environment world, end up ostensibly failing?

*Metronome* raises the issue of the role of art in urban redevelopment, and the often complicit role that such projects have played, whether they are critically appreciated or not. And *Metronome* also highlights, as does *Tilted Arc* and to a lesser extent *The Gates*, the historical tension between art and architecture, and the power dynamics that permanent public art engenders as a result.

And finally, I include *Metronome* as a case study because in its hulking and unloved domination over Union Square, it evokes some of the same issues that plagued *Tilted Arc* even as it was implemented in a different historical and art historical context. It highlights some of the glaring flaws that plague permanent public art of this genre, both in form and in process, and ultimately works to test one of this thesis' central questions: is this application of art now powerless in its ability to capture the contemporary public's imagination?

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<sup>100</sup> I have also seen the cost listed up to \$4.2 billion; reported figures differ.

<sup>101</sup> The New Yorker, "Talk of the Town."

## THE STORY

Related Companies is now one of New York City's biggest developers, having grown rapidly in the 1990s. Along with the site in Union Square, they bought a number of other properties heading south, and called such acquisitions the "necklace." In 1998, the company won the MTA bid to develop the Time Warner Center at Columbus Circle, and in 2008 was selected to develop Hudson Yards, a 26-acre area on Manhattan's west side, among other projects. Unlike most developers who primarily buy land, redevelop and re-sell it, Related Companies emphasizes rental properties. The company was founded by Stephen M. Ross in 1972, who has been its Chairman and Chief Executive Officer ever since.

Mr. Ross, along with Executive Vice President of Related Companies David J. Wine initiated the installation of a work of art on the façade of One Union Square in 1996, one year after it had been built. Mr. Ross first approached the Municipal Arts Society (MAS)<sup>102</sup> to guide them in choosing an architect. MAS put together a poll asking a number of leading architecture firms to select a firm other than themselves whom they would recommend to design the building. The "winner" was

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<sup>102</sup> MAS was founded in 1893 and is essentially the civic conscience for matters relating to New York City's built environment.

architecture firm Davis Brody Bond, a conservative, "lowest common denominator" choice according to Herbert Muschamp, architecture critic for *The New York Times*.<sup>103</sup>

Davis Brody Bond designed and built the 475,000 square foot building in 1995. Built from a mix of brick (for the tower) and glass and metal (for the base), it rises twenty-six stories high: twenty-one residential floors above five mixed commercial use ones (see picture!!). For several years the tenants have been entertainment and retail companies – Virgin Records, Circuit City and a multiplex cinema. The site is interesting not only because it's an odd shape, but also because it's highly visible from several angles and sightlines on various sides, Park Avenue South to the north in particular.

Mr. Ross and Mr. Wine approached MAS again to see how best to approach commissioning work for the wall. In turn, MAS suggested that they get in touch with the Public Art Fund. The Public Art Fund was soon hired as a consultant to create a competition and guide the implementation of the to-be-determined work, even though the Fund was primarily concerned with temporary work. They invited two

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<sup>103</sup> Muschamp, "The Ominous Message of a Box on Union Square."

hundred artists to submit proposals, and one hundred did so. An advisory panel was set up with members of Related Companies, the MAS, the Union Square Community Coalition and the 14<sup>th</sup> Street/Union Square Local Development Corporation Business Improvement District. The panel then shortlisted six artists, and asked each one to develop a proposal for the site at a budget of \$600k.

The final artists included Frank Stella (who lived nearby and knew the site well), Matt Mullican and Tom Otterness. Otterness is a prolific public artist in New York, with witty and well-loved bronzes everywhere from Battery Park City to down in the subway stations.

Frank Stella's proposal was a giant "blob" that would overhang the site. Although Stephen Ross knew and liked Frank Stella's work, the work's dimensions in relation to the street would have been a zoning and regulatory headache. Matt Mullican's work is hard to sum up in lieu of its diversity, but an attempt by one writer went like this: "Since the mid-seventies, Mullican has performed while under hypnosis, made huge banners, used charts and murals to depict a visually schematized



**Figure 30: Tom Otterness sculpture. Image [www.popwhore.com](http://www.popwhore.com)**

private cosmology, and explored virtual reality with the aid of a supercomputer.”<sup>104</sup> Unfortunately Matt Mullican got the address wrong where he was meant to present his work; he was late and disheveled and it weakened his case substantially. In December 1996 the panel chose Jones and Ginzel’s *Metronome*.

Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzel met in the early 1980s when they both had work in a show at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington D.C. They started working together on projects informally, and soon also became romantically involved.<sup>105</sup> By 1983 they formalized their collaboration as “Jones/Ginzel” by getting a studio together and starting to work consistently as a team (they also developed a habit of regularly finishing each other’s sentences, including at public presentations). By the late eighties they were developing a substantial portfolio of public art commissions, which became their most prolific genre. Their work *Mnemonics* for Stuyvesant High School is amongst their best known and lauded; they installed 400 glass blocks containing various historical

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<sup>104</sup> White, “Matt Mullican.”

<sup>105</sup> The latter component of which is said to have recently ended.

narratives and related material, symbolic of the vast wealth of “accumulated knowledge and multi-cultural history of the world.”<sup>106</sup>

### ***Site: Union Square Backstory***

Union Square underwent a classic late capitalist transformation of public space in the 1980s and 1990s. “Emerging” from dereliction in light of the 1970s fiscal crisis and the resultant widespread urban decline, the renewal of Union Square happened largely under the aegis of the newly formed (early 1980s) Union Square Partnership. The first of its kind to be established in New York State, the Union Square Partnership is both a BID and a Local Development Corporation (LDC).

The Union Square Partnership showed its ability to shape public policy and zoning almost immediately under pro-growth mayor Ed Koch. By the 1970s and early 1980s Union Square was considered dangerous, drug-addled and unsightly. When NYU and the New School started buying up vast chunks of land all around Union Square, an influx of wealthy students and visitors were capitalized upon; new high-rises, retail stores and entertainment venues soon followed. The Union Square Greenmarket also grew in popularity and prominence, attracting foodies

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<sup>106</sup> Jones and Ginzel, “Jones/Ginzel Web page.”

from all over the city. Sharon Zukin describes Union Square's redevelopment:

You cannot understand the struggle for authenticity in Union Square without relating to the park, and the streets around it, to economic arguments for privatization when the government's resources are stretched thin. But you must also look at the cultural sources of this struggle in a general anxiety that the city is out of control. You must see Union Square in relation to its own contradictory history of political expression and real estate development, to the changing neighborhoods around it, to other elite parks that are managed by BIDs, and to commercial spaces of civility such as Starbucks.<sup>107</sup>

By the 1990s, when Related Companies came in and bought the site at the corner of 14<sup>th</sup> street and 4<sup>th</sup> avenue, the "revitalization" of Union Square was well underway. Union Square's politically active history, though intermittently still a force there, has been largely forgotten.

### ***The proposal: Metronome***

Their proposal began with a 98-by-50-foot brick wall to act as a "stage" for the work. At the bottom of the wall was a large rock, meant to be a

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<sup>107</sup> Zukin, *Naked City*, 131.



**Figure 31: Union Square today**

boulder symbolic of Precambrian Manhattan bedrock. A 67-foot bronze cone was situated on the north-south axis, leading up to an enormous hand cast (and enlarged) from the equestrian statue of George Washington in the centrally located plinth across the square. A central 5-foot hole, or void called "The Infinity" sits near the middle out of which steam is emitted at various times of the day. On one side of the wall a sphere rotates in sync with the lunar cycle, and on the other side is a 15-place digital clock called "The Passage" that goes up and down according

to the time of day (according to Muschamp it “incoherently tracks some chronological measurement not worth thinking about.”<sup>108</sup>) Gold -flecked paint swirls out from the void, and “The Source” is meant to represent the ultimate source of energy.

The artists had high expectations for public reactions to *Metronome*. They hoped passerby would pause, meditate on the defining nature of time and on their own mortality; it was meant as an “ode to the impossibility of knowing time.” In their own words:

*Metronome* is an investigation into the nature of time. The work references the multiple measures of time that simultaneously inform and confound our consciousness of the moment. The composite work intends to evoke contemplation on the dynamic flux of the city. The elements suggest the instant and infinity, astronomical sequence, geological epoch and ephemerality. *Metronome* is meant to be integral to the very history, architectural fabric, spirit and vitality of the city.<sup>109</sup>

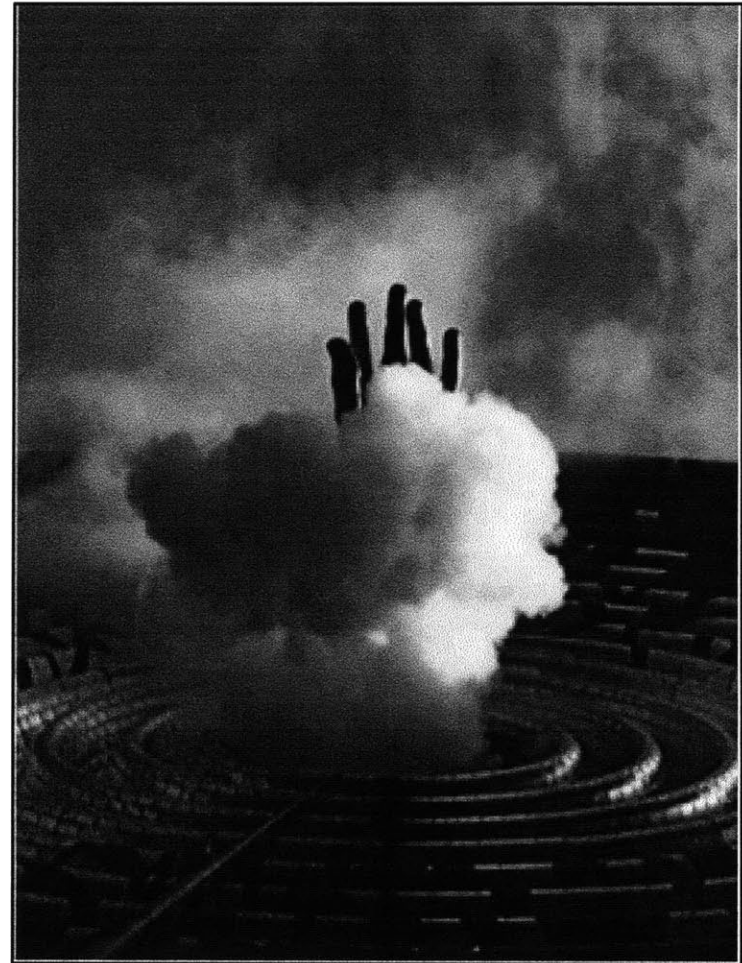


Figure 32: *Metronome* close-up.

Image [www.jonesginzel.com](http://www.jonesginzel.com)

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<sup>108</sup> Muschamp, “The Ominous Message of a Box on Union Square.”

<sup>109</sup> Jones and Ginzal, “Jones/Ginzal Web page.”

The initial budget of \$600k was a figure always expected to be lower than what the eventual cost would be.<sup>110</sup> Work began in February 1999, three years of refining, planning and negotiating after its commission. Related Companies had assumed that they would take the final plans and eventually build the work themselves, but after a year went by, the artists realized the project might never happen and took matters into their own hands. Kristin Jones said of the eventual process: “If you took all the faxes we sent back and forth about this project and weighed them, it would be about equivalent to that rock.”<sup>111</sup>

Workers were hired from all across the globe to complete *Metronome*. Engineers, fabricators, and construction workers from all over the country were enlisted and then faced with a tryingly complex technical task, the rigors of which required enormous skill stretching and patience. Kristin Jones was adamant that all elements of the piece align with the original proposal. When asked to compromise on certain elements, or simplify/pare down the piece, she refused to budge. One source told me they had all been “beaten down and broken” in the end; compromise was not an option.

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<sup>110</sup> Tom Eccles estimated that the brick wall alone would cost that much.

<sup>111</sup> Kastner, “A Giant Timepiece That’s Also a Piece About Time.”

One change that did occur was *Metronome’s* audio component. Originally it was intended that a loud horn noise would emanate from a series of large and very expensive speakers at noon and midnight. Apparently during installation the artists, members of Related Companies and the Public Art Fund went to the site to test out and inspect the installation’s progress. When the horn went off, in addition to the steam charging out of the void, cars started swerving all over the street and people started running. It was as if the building was on the verge of collapse or some sort of bomb had exploded. Stephen Ross heard the screeching tires and honking car horns on the verge of crashing into each other and said: “Ok. We’re not doing that.”<sup>112</sup>

### ***Public Response***

An early protester marched daily to stop *Metronome* as it was being installed. He handed out fliers denouncing the work and collected signatures to petition for work to stop. Many people who saw it going up were confused; public education about the piece wasn’t a consideration. When it did go up, letters flew to the editors of various magazines deriding *Metronome*. One respondent wrote: “If a significant function of public art is to enliven the space it occupies, then

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<sup>112</sup> Anecdotally told to me by Tom Eccles in our interview 11/18/2010.

"Metronome" does little more than invoke a citywide sign of "ho-hum" and wonder at how, with 200 artists invited to submit proposals, this \$3 million lame duck was able to find its way onto one of the most choice sites for public art in town."<sup>113</sup>

It featured on *The New York Post's* "Top 10 buildings we love to hate list," and James Gaynor of *The Observer* explained the strategy of *Metronome* as: "Fail so big that no one can do anything about it. Short of demolishing the building, there seems to be little that anyone can do. New York now has its very own Wailing Wall, a site (and sight) of cultural pilgrimage where the death of aesthetics can be contemplated."<sup>114</sup>

Gaynor leaned toward the positive by suggesting that the piece could end up loved over time, becoming an icon of a silly moment in urban history, though the next sentence was "Or not." As one individual wrote: "This gigantic waste of time, space, and money seems like a satire on all public monuments..."<sup>115</sup> *Metronome* did nothing to help the case for permanent art.

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<sup>113</sup> Shaw, "Union Sq. Art Wall is Large But, Ultimately, Just Flat."

<sup>114</sup> Gaynor, "Citizens Panic! Art Eats Building on Union Square!"

<sup>115</sup> Katz, "New York Voices: Public Opinion."

When I met with Tom Eccles to discuss the project, he seemed a bit shocked and then smiled surreptitiously, half-joking that he'd blocked *Metronome* out of his memory. Having just arrived as the new director of the Public Art Fund, it was a trial-by-fire initiation. He described the project as one begun with all the right intentions, but one that ended up going awry. Eccles argued that the piece is too complicated, visually and in its content. No one understands what the digital clock is doing, and suggesting the lunar cycle has little relevance to most frenetic urbanites. He gave credit to both Related Companies (for being open and amenable, and for maintaining the work all this time – it continues to emit steam, and requires extra care in inclement weather) and to Jones/Ginzel in many instances as well. But ultimately he concedes that *Metronome* is a failed public artwork. He also admitted it was the only time in his tenure at the Public Art Fund that he hired a PR firm to hush up a project.

In 2005 Related Companies teamed up with NYC2012, the organization responsible for trying to win the Olympics bid for New York City, and toyed with the digital face of *Metronome*. Suddenly the numbers changed to reflect the amount of time left before the decision was announced. Again, most people had no idea what the numbers meant.



Jones and Ginzel were disappointed with the tinkering. Andrew Ginzel said: “Works of art are like children. (Changing *Metronome*) is like sending your child off to school and hearing that the teacher has decided to dress it in different clothing.”<sup>116</sup> *Metronome* did ostensible damage to what had been the rapidly rising status of the Jones/Ginzel duo, and perhaps this tinkering only added insult to injury.

## THE SIGNIFICANCE

I chose to include *Metronome* as a case study for two primary reasons. First, how can a project be vetted by numerous selection panels and beat out over two hundred other proposals, only to be basically universally loathed? Can we blame the artists for implementing a project that was essentially unchanged from start to finish? Second, the public art model that *Metronome* belongs to is a conservative one; a sculpture that aspires to be iconic, with separate roles assigned to art and architecture. Some combination of the two is probably to blame, throw in a bit of the wrong aesthetic in the wrong place, and you have the makings of “the most unloved piece of artwork in the city.”

Although I retain the desire to believe and argue that permanent sculpture still has a role to play in the public sphere, *Metronome*, even if ostensibly anecdotal, raises some tricky but critical questions. With the majority of equestrian sculptures going unnoticed, hundreds of pieces sited in airports and corporate plazas (among others) that are at best ignored and at worst jeered at, and the continued implementation of poorly chosen (no curatorial judgment and an often ad hoc selection process) pieces in flagging urban areas that no one likes and that fall apart over time due to lack of maintenance and engagement, we need to either re-evaluate current commissioning models, and/or go further and question whether this kind of public art actually contributes to civic life or just to the continued negative stereotypes about the genre.

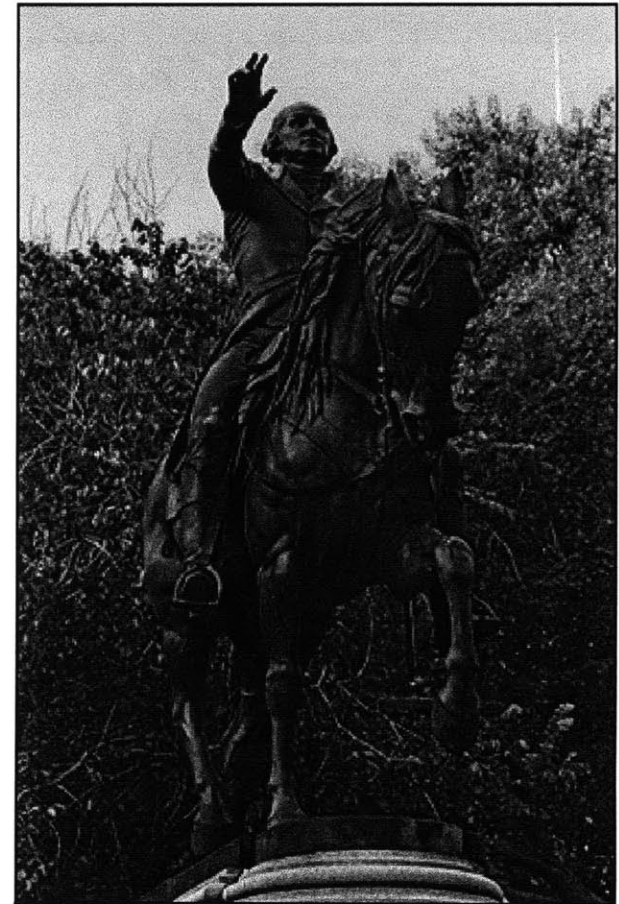
### ***Duration***

This issue of permanent vs temporary public art is one of the most prevalent questions in discussions of the genre today. It angers some people, gives others leverage, and creates an uneasy coexistence. The default answer often given is that there is room for both – they do different things and should both be supported. But in reality there is limited funding and attention available for public art, and vested parties often use the duration of their proposed work to justify support.

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<sup>116</sup> Kurutz, “Union Square: For a Mysterious Clock, Method in its Madness.”

Creative Time and the Public Art Fund, the two New York City public art producers with the most power, specifically avoid permanent work. Creative Time is considered the edgier of the two, regularly engaging with political and social justice issues, and art that addresses such concerns, while the Public Art Fund tends to work with established contemporary artists, finding a space in the city, and almost always installing a temporary sculpture on the site. They were both established in the 1970s, though Public Art Fund was started by Doris Freedman, who had been Director of New York City's Department of Cultural Affairs as well as President of the Municipal Arts Society, while Creative Time twinned its traditional public art aims – enlivening and beautifying the public sphere -- with efforts to bring hitherto unknown artists and provocative work into unusual New York City areas, often dilapidated or undervalued ones.



**Figure 33: Equestrian George Washington, Union Square**

Both Creative Time and the Public Art Fund tap into the same sources of funding, at city, state and national levels, as well as rely on private donations. They both collaborate with city agencies and comply by proving the economic value of their projects (the former perhaps more uneasily), while also aspiring to public art's greatest possible potential – to increase public interaction and curiosity, and to demonstrate the various ways in which art contributes to civic life. Creative Time has grown its efforts and expanded upon its original aims since the 1970s, while keeping its identity as the “alternative” public art producer, while the Public Art Fund has stayed more in line with its original programming structure and maintained closer ties to city government, as many people that I interviewed confirmed. Public Art Fund is said to be current Mayor Bloomberg’s favorite.

It’s impossible to ignore the glaring fact that the two most influential and prolific producers of public art in New York City are solely concerned with temporary work. Further, smaller offspring like the Art Production Fund (three highly-groomed women decked out in expensive and trendy clothing, known for their exclusive parties and collaborations with young art stars), Dale Lanzone’s International Public Art at Marlborough Art Gallery, and Art Times Square (part of the Times Square Alliance,

essentially a Business Improvement District organization) all focus exclusively on ephemeral work. In spite of the fact that permanent commissioning bodies of course still exist and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future, these organizations offer proof that there is most certainly a growing tendency toward temporary public art.



**Figure 34: Art Times Square project.**

Image [www.allartnews.com](http://www.allartnews.com)

Taking this growth a step forward, Creative Time's Creative Director Anne Pasternak has been very vocal about her belief that permanent public art almost never works, while temporary projects have a uniquely higher potential to do so. As part of an article in *The Art Newspaper*, Pasternak wrote:

Despite the enthusiasm for a few acknowledged masterpieces, much public art is pretty terrible... One reason for this is that it is often meant to be permanent. This means artists are limited in their choice of materials and scale, which can stifle their ambition. Public art works have to comply with standards imposed by engineers and safety inspectors, and must not offend public decency. Then there's often a lack of oversight and maintenance that can leave outdoor sculptures looking tragically neglected.<sup>117</sup>

While it's obvious that Pasternak will have a particular bias, I agree that one of the fundamental problems is the bureaucratic lag between public art that works and outdated forms that don't. Commissioning models continue to focus almost solely on permanent public art while except for a few notable exceptions (Antony Gormley's *Angel of the North* in the

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<sup>117</sup> Pasternak, "Short-term solutions to a permanent problem."

UK springs to mind, see Figure 50), temporary public art has been doing much more lately to revitalize urban areas and enliven communities.

Perhaps temporary public art is an outgrowth of the evolution of urban planning and development strategy since the 1970s. New York (that is to say, Manhattan) is fairly anomalous in this regard; it is dense and almost fully built out in a way that other U.S. cities are not. At the risk of oversimplification, with the collapse of the rational comprehensive model of city planning in the 1960s and 70s came the recognition that flexibility, evolution and the dynamic between growth and decay, needed to be incorporated into city planning principles. The ongoing question for several decades now has been how to reconcile the unpredictability of urban modern life with the need to make plans for its future. Temporary public art programs may just be more complementary to new paradigms of city design and development.

### ***Commissioning Models***

There are clearly some glaring contradictions between common commissioning processes and the inability for them to ameliorate the problems they have been set up to address. Even glancing at the commissioning processes of the four case studies in this thesis one

becomes aware of the historically ad hoc nature of public art implementation. Mentioned earlier on but worth reiterating is Sara Selwood's landmark 1995 book (originally a report for the Policy Studies Institute in London) *The Benefits of Public Art: The Polemics of Permanent Art in Public Places*, which took to task the grandiose claims so often made for public art in public policy and urban redevelopment, and studied the inadequacies of commissioning processes across Britain. Selwood parsed several case studies out into three parts: the commissioning, implementation and reception stages. By applying Selwood's framework to *Metronome* we can hypothesize about some of the procedural failings that may have led to its perceived failure.

The commissioning process was remarkably similar to *Tilted Arc* in all but one important way: the client for *Metronome* was a private developer, not a local branch of the federal government. Nevertheless, a small team of so-called "experts" was assembled into a panel to select a number of potential artists for the site. Without consulting any members of the public or seeking outside consultation, the panel then vetted the options down until one choice was agreed upon. *Metronome*, like *Tilted Arc*, was installed without efforts to educate the public or explain to the local community the change that was about to permanently transform

their neighborhood. Even once installed, nothing was established to offer explanation or guidance to the work then, or now. Anecdotally a friend told me recently that he had paid a homeless man a dollar who, standing near *Metronome*, was offering passerby an explanation behind the large digital changing numbers. It's not exactly a map of Hollywood, but the meaning of *Metronome* was as obscured from audiences as many a celebrity's home address.

Herein lies one of public art's main paradoxes: the lack of a democratic production process means disconnected and often disappointed audiences, yet attempts at incorporating public engagement nearly always end up in either a stalemate or a lukewarm piece of art work. Many of the urban planning profession's dilemmas stem from the same problem. The Modernist model failed because it was seen as too top-down, yet opening the process up to participation has yet to yield perfectly democratic results. Curitiba, Brazil is a famous example of how firm top-down urban planning can work. Urban planner turned mayor Jamie Lerner worked unilaterally to enhance public transportation, develop green initiatives and curb sprawl from the 1960s onwards, and Curitiba is now considered an international urban planning success story. Is there another way that the Related Companies could have proceeded,

vis a vis public opinion, that would have resulted in a better sculpture for the wall?

While it would be conjecture to posit an answer to such a question, reading some of the public responses makes it clear that no small part of the derision directed toward *Metronome* has been due to its uncommunicated foisting upon Union Square. Lacking a sense of shared ownership, respondents instead seemed to feel that their right to participate in the creation of a public space had been fundamentally violated. The balance between the need for a measure of artistic autonomy and the need for the inherent co-creation of public space has yet to be reconciled.



Figure 35: WTC memorial by designer Peter Walker.

Image [www.gothamist.com](http://www.gothamist.com)

### ***The Architecture Problem***

In my discussion with Mierle Laderman Ukeles, she pointed to the multiplied challenges of permanent public art. Beyond the regular lack of curatorial insight, Ukeles also believes that something about permanent work raises all sorts of power struggles in a way that temporary work never will. Suddenly, art is competing with architecture (and other urban forces) to shape the built environment. Part of the reason why *Metronome* seems to fail (at least to me), is that it too literally acknowledges this fact. Much as Serra had done, Jones and Ginzel wanted to make a big iconic piece, and they were given \$3 million to do so. Its poetic message starts to seem proselytizing, and its scale comes across as arrogant and unavoidable with that price tag.

*Metronome* gives its audience no choice of whether to engage with it or not; it demands attention.

Again, the underlying aims that Serra had with *Tilted Arc* were similar. He directly engaged the architecture of the site (Federal Plaza), while that was of course an unavoidable element of the brief for the Union Square site. *Metronome* limply acknowledges the statue of George Washington nearby and the view up Park Avenue, but otherwise does very little to make the most of its site. The real expectation was that

*Metronome* would be able to cover up some ugly architecture. As is so often the problem, art is brought in at the end to act as salve for unattractive and failed places and spaces, only to be blamed for the entirety of the site's inadequacies when it almost always invariably fails to do so.

Even though Herbert Muschamp had no problem laying all the failures of permanent art with regards to architecture on *Metronome*, it seems, much as *Tilted Arc* had done a decade earlier, to have been the wrong piece of art at the right time. In other words, it was an easy target for an argument that Muschamp (and likely others) had been meaning to make for some time. But also like *Tilted Arc*, it's likely that just as much of *Metronome's* aesthetic failings can be blamed on an ugly architectural context and a lack of institutional support and fair process.

Herbert Muschamp wrote of *Metronome*:

One Union Square fails on three counts. The architecture is big and boring, the artwork glued to its main facade is pretentious, and the thinking that joined the two is out of date. This is the worst example yet seen of a formula that has helped to drain the life out of New York architecture in

recent years - the use of public art to cover up for uninspired buildings.<sup>118</sup>

Muschamp went on to cite the failure of scale in both the building and the artwork. He wrote of the building's lack of relationship to the architectural context of Union Square, and *Metronome's* "bigness" on an already big and ungainly wall. Further, he argued, the art and architecture don't work together; they do nothing to take on the challenge of constrictive zoning and commercial design on the site. Muschamp found a prime opportunity with *Metronome* to deride New York's failure to produce good architecture for decades; turning it into a provincial hinterland in terms of cutting edge architectural design. And he blamed public art for acting as a "fig leaf," covering up the city's unfortunate tendency toward banal, safe architecture.

I can think of no stronger example than *Metronome* to back up my hesitant claim that the distinctions between architecture and public art need to be examined and redefined. Artists working in the public sphere are ill equipped to deal with the bureaucracy of New York's built environment. Architects are used to it. In my opinion Jones and Ginzel

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<sup>118</sup> Muschamp, "The Ominous Message of a Box on Union Square."

should have never been commissioned to play tango with the building's enormous wall, an architect(s) should have been. What the site needs is a strong piece of design, affecting in its shape and use of space, not a piece of art whose message almost immediately seemed antiquated, if not patronizing. Artists can and should continue to consider space and site, and use sculpture in some form to do so, but as commissioning processes currently stand, I hesitantly believe that such forays should be temporary. It may be true that artists sometimes relish the need to think creatively when constrained, but ultimately the rigors of urban bureaucracy are more suffocating to the requisite amount of autonomy that I believe artists will always fundamentally require.

### ***Anachronisms***

*Metronome's* aesthetic and art historical contexts aside, it's important to consider the sociopolitical terrain within which the piece was executed. As mentioned earlier, Union Square is a prime example of a New York City space whose gentrification and coincident privatization were well underway by the 1990s of Mayor Giuliani. The ease with which *Metronome* slid through planning permissions and construction befit a period within which private interests had become king. In a way it's as if the intentions behind *Metronome* were no more "artistic" than

the addition of nearby record and clothing stores, sprucing up the area and ridding it of its once revolutionary air.

Giuliani's notorious measures to control public space meant that only the most innocuous art managed to slip by. No mayor in the history of New York has had more civil liberty lawsuits brought against him. REPOHistory, a public art group led by Greg Sholette, had a controversial sign project covertly shut down by Giuliani under the auspices of zoning and safety measures. The group's m.o. is (it still exists) to offer alternative versions of historical events (they are a veritable Howard Zinn of the art world). With the Lower Manhattan Sign Project, REPOHistory posted signs on lampposts all around lower Manhattan, coincident with the city's Christopher Columbus celebrations that displayed reworked narratives of the country's founding. Giuliani, although present at the work's unveiling, quickly and subversively worked to get rid of the signs as quickly as possible. At one point there had been talk that they could become permanent. Under Giuliani they were barely even allowed to exist temporarily.



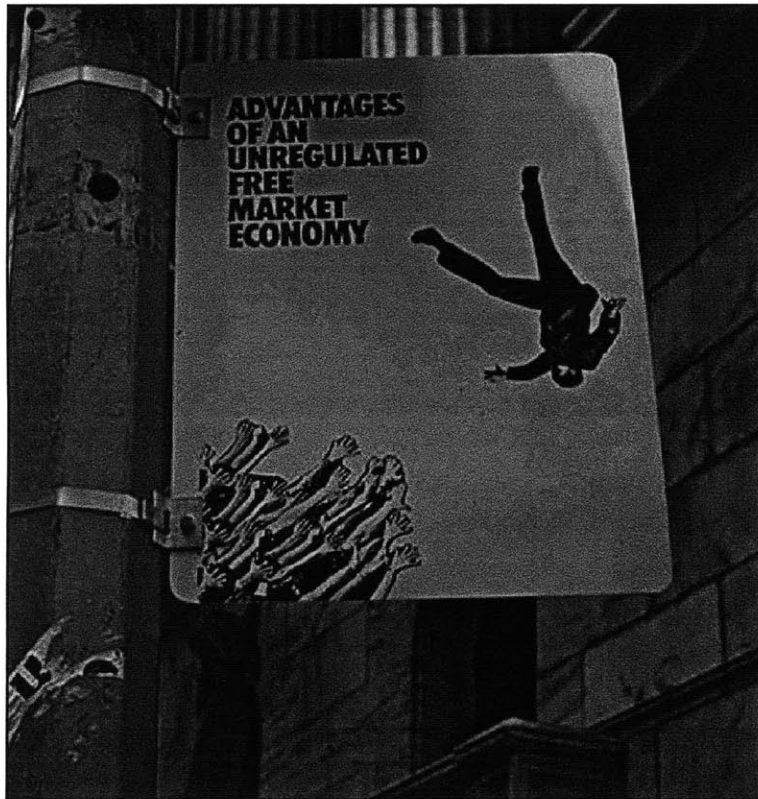


Figure 36: REPOhistory Lower Manhattan Sign Project.

Image [www.REPOhistory.org](http://www.REPOhistory.org)

Mayor Koch had planted the seeds of New York's neoliberal social and economic policies in the 1980s. Giuliani only took Koch's efforts a step further in the 1990s. Civil order and safety was now to be assured by

hordes of shoppers and consumers, the new constant version of Jane Jacobs' "eyes on the street."<sup>119</sup> Alongside all other possibilities that *Metronome* just doesn't seem to work is the juxtaposition of the art within this late 20<sup>th</sup> century urban shopping mall version of public space. It's unlikely that even Chicago's Picasso would have worked in the Union Square of the late 1990s. This anachronistic element of *Metronome*, the uneasy melding of art and commerce (leaving Warhol aside for the moment) as the saviors of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, leaves the sculpture sitting awkwardly on the southeastern most corner, an ungainly older sister to the gleaming Whole Foods now bustling on its left.

### ***"Postscript"***

The art and commerce pairing in Union Square has received renewed attention this year in a project recently opened by the Public Art Fund. From March 30 to October 2<sup>nd</sup> of 2011, sculptor Rob Pruitt's silver replica of Andy Warhol will sit on the corner of 17th Street and Broadway, diagonally across from *Metronome* in Union Square. Warhol, whose famous "Factory" once stood nearby, as well as the popular artist watering hole Max's Kansas City, is known for his repeating Campbell's

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<sup>119</sup> Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*.



**METRONOME**

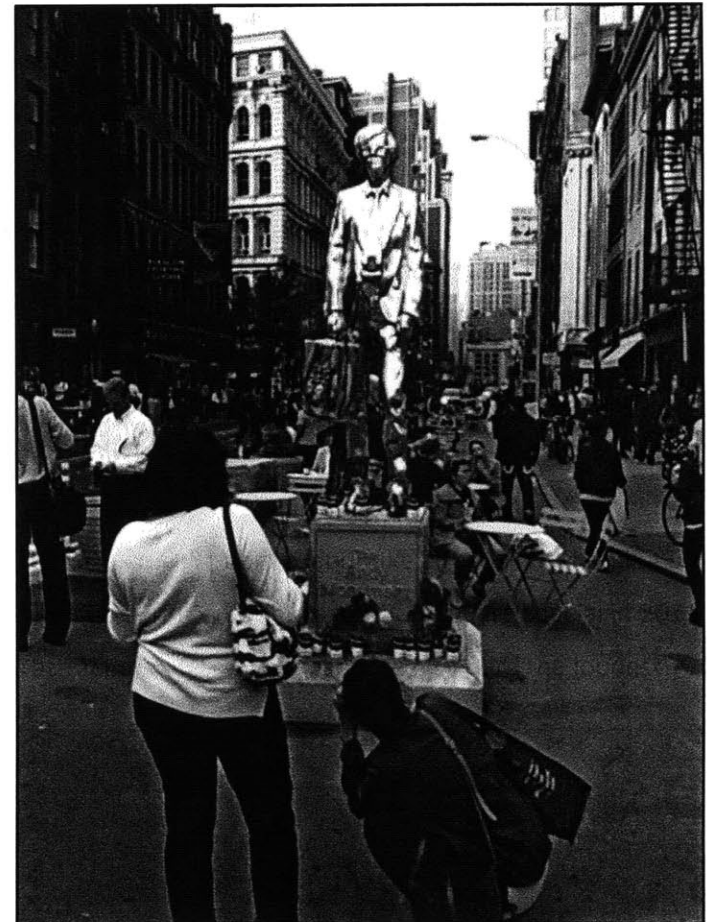
soup cans and dictate “Being good in business is the most fascinating kind of art. Making money is art and working is art and good business is the best art” looms figuratively in the site’s air. (see pictures!x, y, z)

As with all of Public Art Fund’s projects, *The Andy Monument* will be temporary, and will be taken down at the end of the summer. It’s as though the artist has been temporarily reincarnated to take stock of Union Square thirty years later. Were his predictions and Oscar Wilde-an aphorisms accurate? Would he smile and wink toward *Metronome*, giggling at its misplaced and unloved attempts to make consumers ponder their own mortality? Warhol also said “I never think people die. They only go to department stores.” Looking over the statue of George Washington and toward *Metronome* surrounded by Starbucks, Virgin Records, Forever 21 and other retail establishments I can’t help but wonder how this fits in with *Metronome*’s uneasy siting.

Tourists pose to take photos in front of the sculpture, locals reflect on what must have been a very different Union Square in the 1960s and 1970s, in a very different New York. One of the City’s new pedestrian-only areas (see picture!) runs to the north of the sculpture, with green metal seats and tables laid out along Broadway. People sit and talk to

**Figure 37: Union Square facing south. Image, author’s own.**

each other, yell into their cell phones, and take a rest from charging up and down Manhattan’s grid. What makes Union Square special in 2011? Which aspects attract and detract, whose voice is heard the loudest?



**Figure 38: Rob Pruitt/Public Art Fund *Andy Monument*.**

Image, author’s own.

Jones and Ginzel made many other public art projects that were beautiful, engaging and meaningful to many people. Their *Mnemonics* project at Stuyvesant High School, *Oculus* at the World Trade Center subway station and *Mimesis* in Times Square, among others, were all more or less successful at communicating the poetic meanings endemic to their work. So who is to blame for the failure of *Metronome*, if it can even unequivocally be deemed one?

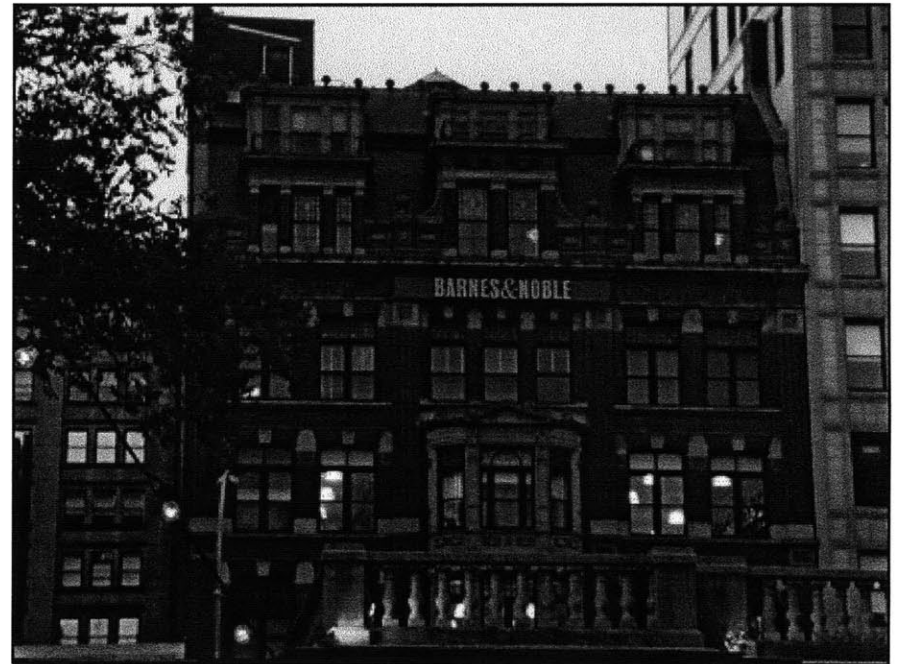
I'm wary of being misleading by using *Metronome* as a sole example of permanent public art, and juxtaposing it with an ad hoc set of successful temporary projects. There are countless unloved temporary public art works as well. Perhaps the central point is that built into all temporary work is an allowance to fail. Permanent public art does not have this luxury. In fact I'd venture to say that there are just as many attractive, interesting and thought-provoking examples of permanent public work created as there are temporary ones, the problem is that the failures linger, affect their built contexts more aggressively and enduringly, and almost always cost more money to produce. Thus the potential negative magnitude of influence is higher with permanent work than it can ever

be with temporary work; the risks are higher, but the quality of work isn't inherently so.

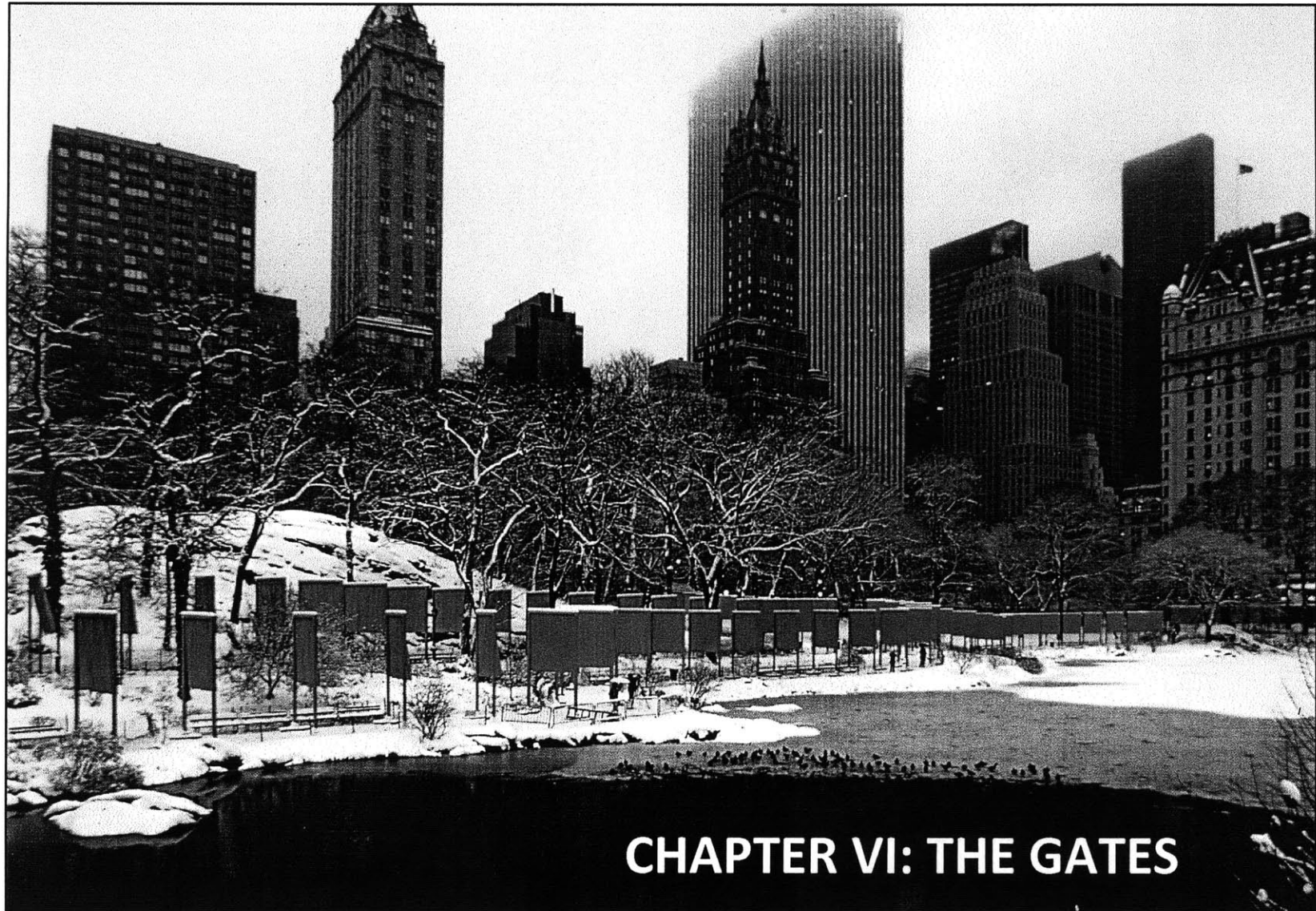
One of the admittedly overlooked facts about *Metronome*, compared to the other three case studies, is that it was funded by private money. Is this significant and if so, in what ways? Did the client feel less beholden to the public as a result or more so? A stereotype often fought by those involved with public art is the idea that private funding of public art projects suggests a controlling and biased driving hand. Many producers insist that the reverse is true – private funders often give the biggest leeway and free rein to artists and producers, while public money has reams of string attached to it. Private landholders are more amenable to works sited on their property, whereas city property is heavily guarded and managed.

As we turn to the next case study, Jean-Claude and Christo's *The Gates*, we'll see how patron saint of the arts Mayor Bloomberg used his political powers in much the same way, only this time to near universal enthusiasm. I've struggled to glean any possible pluses from the very existence of *Metronome*, only managing to come up with the rather limp and ironic possibility that it will help to catalyze changes to

commissioning models in both New York City and elsewhere. It also hangs as an experiment as to whether and how a permanent work of art will change over time, both in meaning and reception. The behemoth stands as a warning sign to public art commissioners working under staid, antiquated, and ultimately flawed processes. As a work of art *Metronome* inspires public art lovers everywhere to rise to the challenge of discovering new models and modes of injecting art into the public sphere. It teaches us what *not* to do, which may be as valuable a lesson as any success story can offer.



**Figure 39: Barnes & Noble, Union Square.**



## CHAPTER VI: THE GATES

The work of husband and wife team Jeanne-Claude and Christo is internationally known for its particular imagery – huge swathes of colorful fabric used to wrap, adorn and/or transform – and emphatic process and staging. They are probably the most visible high-profile artists who consistently privileged working in the public realm. Sadly Jeanne-Claude died in 2009, but not before the duo had amassed decades worth of work on an international scale, and perhaps most importantly realized their longest-running battle: *The Gates, Project for Central Park, New York City* (more commonly and hereafter referred to as *The Gates*) in 2005.

*The Gates*, which took over Central Park for sixteen days in February 2005, had been conceived and initiated in 1979, twenty-six years earlier. The project was a “game-changer” according to many of my interviewees, and seemed to prove the growing belief that public art could be an economic catalyst for cities. Reception was mixed, with many art critics leaning toward the unenthusiastic. However according to one critic, *The Gates* successfully merged a rupture that had developed in modern art:

If, as has been much argued, modern art is split between the pursuit of spontaneity, which is invariably short-lived, and the search for a new monumentality, symbolized by constructivism, then *The Gates* constructed and monumentalized transient spontaneity. They accomplished a postmodern task: they seamlessly integrated avant-garde opposites.<sup>120</sup>

Aesthetic considerations aside, the processes deployed in the development, implementation and reception periods enliven questions of when and where public art and urban planning discourses overlap. The Christos considered engagement and participation with planners, city officials, community members and various other stakeholders as integral to their work. *The Gates* is also closely aligned with urban politics, as Bloomberg’s support has been widely acknowledged as the sole reason the project finally came to fruition. *The Gates* had an explicit relationship to expense, had no aspirations to engage critically with contemporary art discourse, and perhaps most uniquely of all, became a destination. That *The Gates* sparked dialogue about many issues central to public art in the 21<sup>st</sup> century may be its greatest legacy.

**Figure 40: *The Gates* in the snow. Image Christo 2005.**

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<sup>120</sup> Kuspit, “The Gates: The Ephemeral Monumentalized.”

## THE STORY – PART A

*The Gates* was conceived in a different era – the 1970s – than it was implemented. In its conception its peers are the work of Ukeles and Serra, and yet it was unrealizable within the urban political context of its original formation.<sup>121</sup> The artists began by wanting to do a project involving people simply walking through the streets, but quickly abandoned it once they realized it would be nearly impossible to get permission to do so. Over the years they also submitted proposals for wrapping MoMA and the Whitney Museum, as well as buildings in lower Manhattan (their long-time home), but were rejected on all counts. So they quickly moved on to sketching out plans for an elaborate system of “gates” to cover twenty-three miles of pathways in Central Park.

The Christos began their trademark navigation of urban bureaucracy by teaming up with a lawyer named Theodore J. Kheel, to whom they’d been recommended by mutual friends. Although Kheel loved the arts, he admitted he was not close to the Ed Koch. They went ahead anyway,

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<sup>121</sup> I seem to be mirroring here Jeanne-Claude’s repeated personification of *The Gates* as her children. At the Bloomberg press conference, when a reporter pressed her to give a cost figure for “The Gates,” she told him, “Go and ask your mother if she could give an estimate for the cost of raising you.” (Tomkins, “The Gates to the City; Onward and Upward with the Arts.”)

and had an initial meeting with Gordon Davis, Commissioner of Parks and Recreation of the City of New York who appreciated the work of the Christos but was unenthusiastic about installing 7,000 fabric-covered portals in Central Park.<sup>122</sup>

The Christos then had forty-one meetings with everyone from Agnes Gund (a long-time arts patron and President of MoMA from 1991 to 2002) to Andrew Stein, then-President of the Borough of Manhattan. They recruited numerous high-profile members of New York’s art world, including the President of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (the closest museum to Central Park) to their cause, and presented *The Gates* proposal at various meetings, including the Central Parks Conservancy and the Architectural League. The Christos made prototypes to test, and involved experts such as arborists and ornithologists to find ways to mitigate potentially damaging effects to the park. They also began preparations to do a Human Impact Study about *The Gates*, and were willing to sign strict contracts about how the project would be implemented.

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<sup>122</sup> Davis was newly appointed and very committed to saving a dying Central Park. He co-created the Central Parks Conservancy to raise private money to restore the park, and was trepidatious about ambitious projects like *The Gates* in such a sensitive context.



But in 1981 they received a 185-page long rejection report from Gordon J. Davis. He stated that although the Department found the project “visually seductive and of great esthetic charm,” he believed that it was in the wrong place, at the wrong time, and in the wrong scale. In 1981, Central Park was vastly different than it would be in 2005.<sup>123</sup> The city was in bad shape, and its parks were no exception. Davis (along with many others) also feared setting a precedent. Clearly, he had given the project ample thought.

An editorial from *The New York Times* in support of his decision stated: “It risks not only extensive damage to a fragile, man-made landscape, but would also require costly services from understaffed city departments... (*The Gates*) would seriously interfere with Central Park’s use and maintenance. This huge “alteration” of the park is impossible to justify in terms of time, effort or money.”<sup>124</sup> The editorial went on to question the use of public property for private gain, especially for something so lavish and expensive, as well as used inverted commas to highlight Christo’s huge ego: “He regards official obstacles as part of the

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<sup>123</sup> Gordon J. Davis said he had inherited “an empire that looked,” as he put it, “like Napoleon’s army retreating from Moscow.” Tomkins, “The Gates to the City; Onward and Upward with the Arts.”

<sup>124</sup> Editorial, “Closing Christo’s Gates.”

esthetic process of getting the work done and genuinely believes he can persuade officials with his ‘humility’ until art conquers all. Well, we are not persuaded.”<sup>125</sup> The populist battles of “the people” vs. “the artist” that dominated the story of *Tilted Arc* are perhaps foreshadowed here. In a pre-decision editorial the *New York Times* wrote that the park needed “restoration” not “exploitation.”<sup>126</sup>



**Figure 41: Central Park in the 1970s**

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<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> The seeming anger coming from *The New York Times* evokes an interesting point made by Harriet Senie in her book about *Tilted Arc*. The “media’s” representation of art” is an understudied phenomena that raises issues of high-brow vs. low-brow and the antagonism that such competition has historically created.

Opposition was presented mainly as a protective conservatism toward doing anything with, or more importantly to, Central Park. Further, Central Park was “already a work of art” without a bunch of orange flags adorning it, opponents flatly stated. Many argued that the project would be a waste of money, even though the Christos had agreed to bear the costs themselves. Perhaps surprisingly, when the Human Impact Study was completed the following year (1982), results showed that enthusiasm for the project came primarily from less affluent New Yorkers, with affluent neighbors mostly against. The former believed that the project would unite divided neighborhoods, as the gates would span midtown Manhattan to Harlem.<sup>127</sup>

For the next twenty-two years the Christos focused on other projects, while *The Gates* sat unchanged. The project was always intended to cover twenty-three miles of paths in Central Park, last for two weeks, and be paid for by Christo and Jeanne-Claude, not by the City.<sup>128</sup>

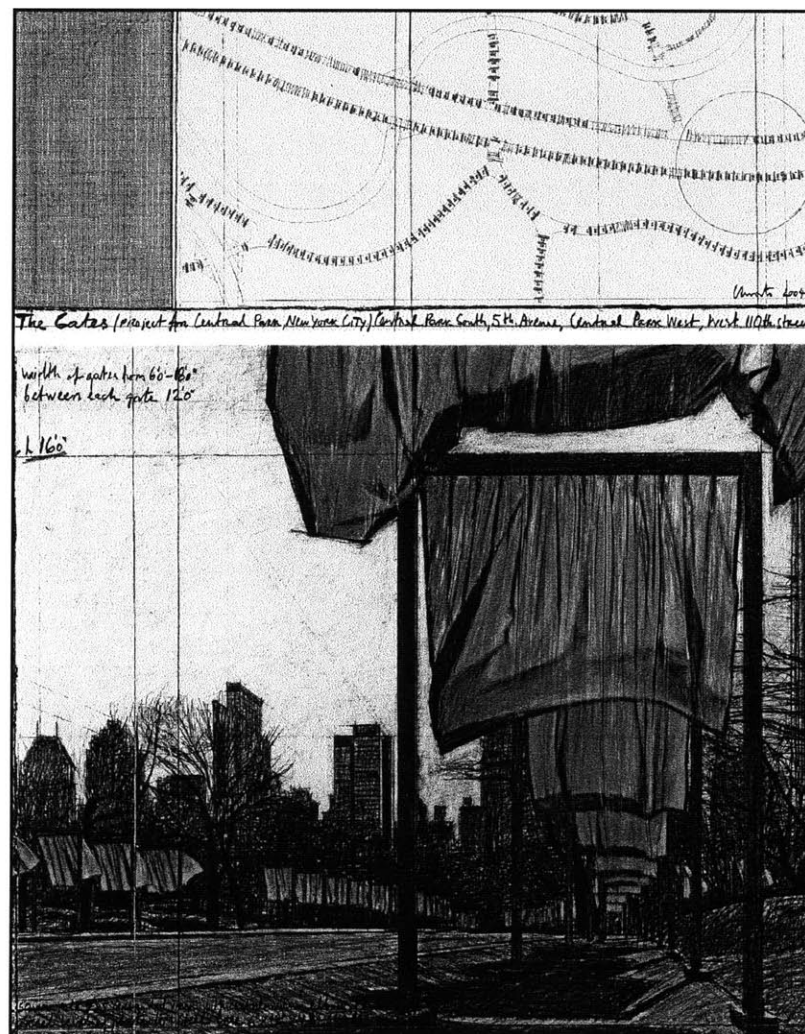


Figure 42: Original sketches for *The Gates*.

Image Christo 2005.

<sup>127</sup> Stoilas, “Twenty-six years to put the curtains up.”

<sup>128</sup> Camnitzer, “From Christo to Hare Krishna.”

## THE STORY – PART B

“It really took a change in administration for *The Gates* to happen,” said Charlotte Cohen at the GSA, stating a fact that has become doctrine. The Christos admitted that they didn’t even bother trying to make the project happen during the Giuliani administration (because they didn’t “enjoy banging their heads against a stone wall”<sup>129</sup>), though they did start trying to build support in the Central Parks Conservancy again when it took over administration of the park in 1998.

### **Mayor Bloomberg**

New York City can be a small world: many of Bloomberg’s staff worked in the art and cultural offices of the Koch administration.<sup>130</sup> Patricia Harris, Bloomberg’s current Deputy Mayor, was Executive Director of the Art Commission for twelve years during the Koch administration. Kate Levin, now Commissioner of the DCA, worked as Interim Head of Cultural Affairs, also during Koch’s tenure. Under Bloomberg, not only did *The Gates* finally happen, but so did some other major (read: expensive) public arts projects that most likely wouldn’t have in previous administrations, such as Olafur Eliasson’s *The NYC Waterfalls* in 2008

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<sup>129</sup> Tomkins, “The Gates to the City; Onward and Upward with the Arts.”

<sup>130</sup> New York’s political hierarchy is like to the Vatican according to Tom Eccles, former Director of the Public Art Fund.

(Fig. X). Both the Eliasson project and *The Gates* were co-produced with the Public Art Fund (to reiterate an earlier point, the PAF is an organization that Bloomberg is rumored to favor). However, as Richard Griggs at the Fund said of Bloomberg: “He really made an environmental rather than a specific policy change.”

On January 22, 2003 Bloomberg announced that the City had given permission to Christo and Jeanne-Claude to realize *The Gates* in Central Park. In a TV montage of news coverage from 2004-5, Commissioner Henry Stern (successor to Gordon Davis) said: “If the mayor wants to hang up underwear in Central Park and it doesn’t cost the city anything, let him do it.”<sup>131</sup> Gordon Davis, who had been the Parks Commissioner the first time around, attended the public announcement and officially stated his support for *The Gates* now that the Park was in a restored state.

A contract was eventually drafted between the City of New York, the Department of Parks and Recreation and the Christos, but not until several rounds of negotiations. First the Dept. of Parks and Recreation wanted them to pay a fee of three million dollars beyond the cost of

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<sup>131</sup> Stoilas, “Twenty-six years to put the curtains up.”

installation, insurance, maintenance and removal. In a Village Voice article the Christos referred to the fee as “extortion” after which they issued an immediate apology to Benepe and the rest of the administration.<sup>132</sup> They agreed to the fee and a final contract was drafted, requiring that the artists provide:

- \* Personal and property liability insurance "holding harmless" the City of New York, the Department of Parks and Recreation and the Central Park Conservancy.
- \* Restoration bond providing funds for complete removal.
- \* Full cooperation with the Department of Parks and Recreation, the Central Park Conservancy, the New York Police Department, the New York City Arts Commission, the Landmarks Commission and the Community Boards.
- \* Clearance for the usual activities in the park and access of rangers, maintenance, clean up, police and emergency vehicles.
- \* The artists shall pay all costs of the park's supervision directly related to the project.
- \* Neither vegetation nor rock formations shall be disturbed.
- \* "The *Gates* will be clear of rocks, tree roots and low branches.
- \* Only small vehicles will be used and they will be confined to existing walkways during installation and removal.
- \* The people of New York will continue to use Central Park as usual.

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<sup>132</sup> Tomkins, “The Gates to the City; Onward and Upward with the Arts.”

- \* After the removal, the site shall be inspected by the Department of Parks and Recreation, which will be holding the security bond until satisfaction.<sup>133</sup>

*The Gates* was staffed by hundreds of volunteers eager to answer questions, and was augmented by informational signs posted all over the park. Most of the information had to do with the statistics of construction. 7,503 gates, stretching along 23 miles of paths, thousands of yards of saffron fabric, hundreds of hours of labor and \$21 million dollars were popular figures. The signs also described the 400 drawings that Christo made and hoped to sell for \$30 to \$40 thousand (\$16 million in total) to make up for the cost they had borne.

*The Gates* was subject to a heavy marketing campaign. NYC & Company promoted it to domestic and international visitor markets through, according to the press release: “Travel wholesale marketing, incentive and tour travel development and travel media outlets.” They were also promoted in NYC’s official tourism marketing materials. A full roster of hotel deals and other discounts were offered online.

Many found it hard to believe that the Christos were planning on financing the entire \$21 million project themselves (especially in light of

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<sup>133</sup> King, “Christo and Jeanne-Claude Discuss ‘The Gates’.”

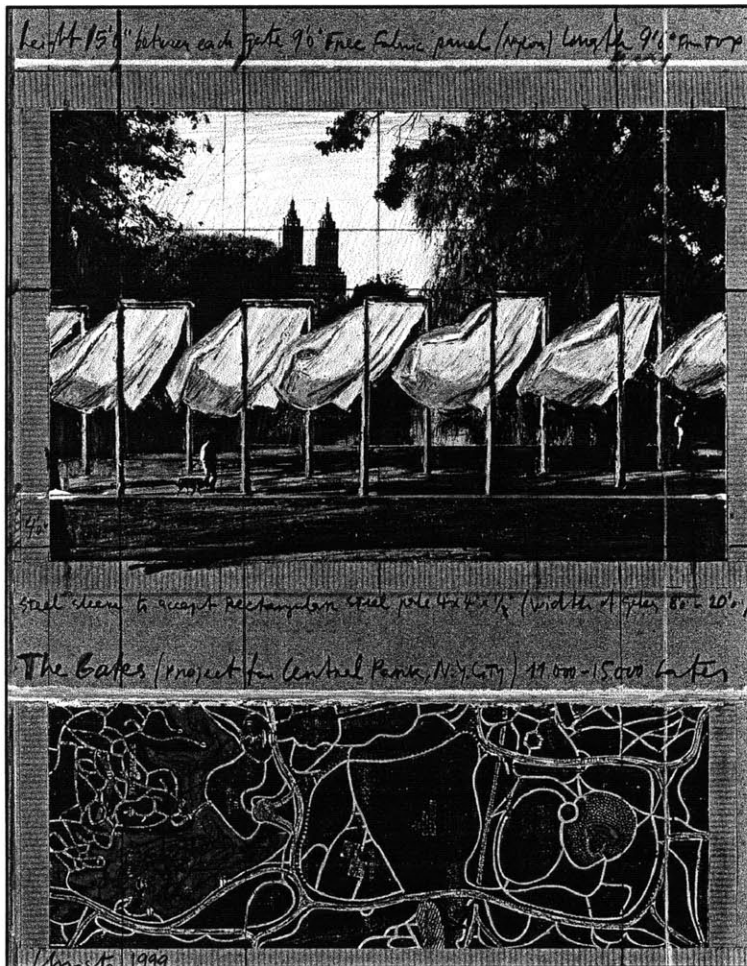
the fact that the artists always refused sponsorship or allowed advertising), and were even more surprised when the profits generated by art tourists to *The Gates* were reported to be in the vicinity of \$254

million. One million people came the first weekend, hotels had twice their normal February occupancy, and the Metropolitan Museum also hit record attendance figures.<sup>134</sup> *The Gates* came to be seen as a resounding success.

## THE SIGNIFICANCE

*The Gates* is the only one of my case studies that was implemented in purposeful cooperation with City politics, and the only one that seems to have pleased the public as much as the artists and/or producers. In a way it harkens back to public art's original purposes – physical and psychological urban revitalization through city beautification. *The Gates* is unique not only for this reason, but also because of the artists' emphasis on the process itself, as well as on their belief in participation (Ukeles has a different take on what the latter means; more on this later). And like Serra, the Christos had a particular approach to site, in this case Central Park, for which they considered their project to be completely site-specific and non-transferable.

**Figure 43: Original sketches for *The Gates*. Image Christo 2005.**



<sup>134</sup> Bellini, "New York Tales: Reflections in a Glass Curtain."

### ***Money Part I: Economics/Sociopolitics***

*The Gates* was promoted as a tourist attraction and crowd mobilizer in the wake of 9/11's economic consequences. Deputy Mayor Patricia Harris said: "New York was still very raw after the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001, but we were trying to bring dynamic events and positive energy back to the city."<sup>135</sup> The projected attendance figures re-awakened the belief in art's catalytic and rallying power.<sup>136</sup>

Art critic Hal Foster wrote that *The Gates* suited Bloomberg's "'Don't Worry be Happy" (otherwise known as 'Big Business Don't Leave')" agenda. He wrote:

The Gates made for friendly city politics and nice holiday aesthetics, and no one can be against sociability in the park. Yet for what exactly was this festival of the people staged? *The Gates* prettied up an extraordinary public place, but the fanfare was empty of social consequence: the city blocked a demonstration against the Republican Convention in the park, but gave a green light to Christo. Out of one eye, then, I saw an enjoyable mass art event; out of the other, a telling instance of high kitsch in the Bloomberg-Bush era, a cross

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<sup>135</sup> Flanagan, "The Gates Journal."

<sup>136</sup> Kuspit, "The Gates: The Ephemeral Monumentalized."

between the Yellow Brick Road and a grand opening where the packaging was literally all.<sup>137</sup>

The fact that Bloomberg had blocked the Republican Convention from happening in the park several months earlier, citing potential damage, was mentioned several times. So was the fact that Bloomberg bought two drawings, reportedly at a cost of \$800 thousand dollars. The anger toward art with a capital A evidently still persists, even twenty years on from *Tilted Arc*.

Bloomberg's support for the arts goes hand in hand with his status as "brand maker, *par excellence*."<sup>138</sup> As urban and cultural sociologist Miriam Greenberg describes it: "This mayoral administration has normalized and institutionalized the branding approach to an unprecedented extent," bringing in top branding agency Wolff Olins to design its "This is NYC" tourism campaign, and the integration of marketing into many city offices. Bloomberg also unleashed business-marketing campaigns like "Luxury City" to attract global elites and push

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<sup>137</sup> Foster, "In Central Park."

<sup>138</sup> Chan, "When New York Branded Its Way Out of Crisis."

out working-class enclaves,<sup>139</sup> much to the continued effect of Deutsche's account of the 1980s.

Many art lovers are of course relieved to have someone like Bloomberg in power. Not only has he brought the art and cultural offerings of New York City to the fore, but he has also provided the City money needed to make it happen. It's exciting to have someone in power willing to cut through all of the red tape to make unusual experiences happen in New York, a city that has become increasingly predictable in the last several decades. On the other hand, Bloomberg's interest in the arts means that he is more involved on several levels.

Tom Eccles – Director of the Public Art Fund from 1997 to 2005— of course appreciated Bloomberg's support for public art, but also paradoxically believes that the Giuliani administration was as good a time for public art. Because of the mayor's disinterest, producers and artists were able to disentangle from political processes and "do their own thing." That the arts are now a key part of Bloomberg's platform means that they are also now more closely monitored and managed.

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<sup>139</sup> Greenberg, *Branding New York*.

### ***Money Part II***

The artists fund all of their projects themselves. They claim that it's the only way to retain complete freedom – the objects cannot be owned, bought or sold, no fee can be charged for viewing them, and they are completely open to the public. In a press release for *The Gates* they said: "All our work is about freedom... nobody can buy our projects, nobody can sell tickets to experience our projects. Freedom is the enemy of possession and possession is equal to permanence. That is why our projects cannot remain and must go away forever."

The Christos raise funding by selling preparatory drawings, paintings, lithographic editions, sculptures and collages of their projects to collectors. They do not sell photographs of their works, nor do they receive royalties on posters, postcards, or books. For *The Gates* they also established a charitable foundation with the Central Parks Conservancy called "Nurture New York's Nature," donating the rights to sell products associated with *The Gates* to park upkeep.

One of the hushed up, lesser-known facts is that the couple has been able to rely on Jeanne-Claude's wealthy family in times of financial duress. When *Running Fence* was on the brink of financial collapse, they

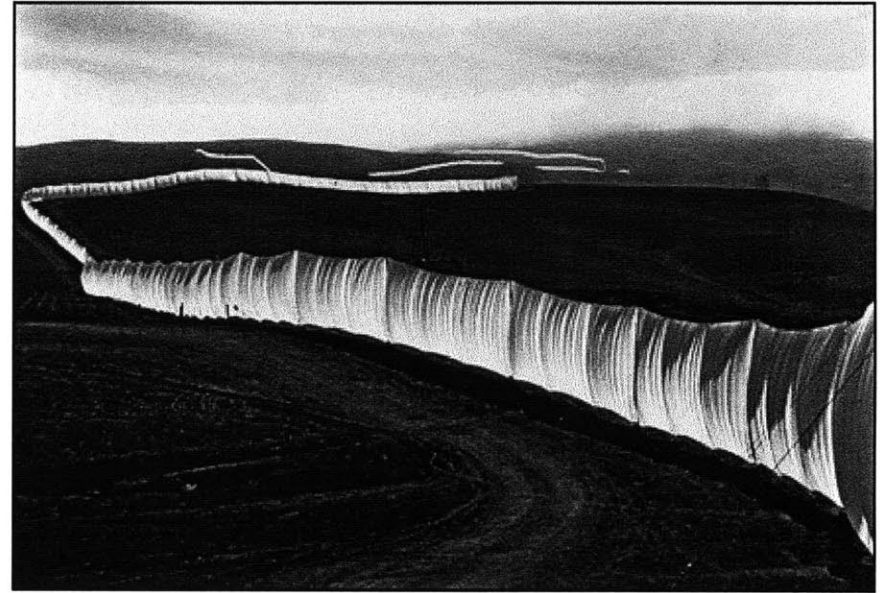
borrowed \$110k from her mother (whose father had made a fortune from rubber plants in Brazil in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century), which she later repaid with interest. Also, her stepfather was a trusted officer of Charles De Gaulle, and he was able to pull strings when the couple staged projects in Paris; security officers turned a blind eye. The Christo union has been called the perfect melding of socialism and capitalism, in both personal<sup>140</sup> and professional ways. Jeanne-Claude ran millions of dollars through the CVJ Corporation (his initials), and was regularly borrowing money from banks and managing sales of their work simultaneously.

They are adept at the intricacies of the capitalist financing system, but only exploit it to the extent that it doesn't hinder their artistic or aesthetic freedoms.<sup>141</sup> Further they don't seek to make a profit, which of course subverts the capitalist system. Christo often pointed to how irritating this idea seemed to be for many people; not wanting to make money is somehow irrational. The way they managed their money also became part of the conceptual process of the work.

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<sup>140</sup> She has bourgeois French roots with financial means, and he comes from a peasant family in Bulgaria.

<sup>141</sup> Harper, "Financing 'The Gates'."



**Figure 44: *Running Fence*. Image Christo 1978.**

Their collaborative process also involved clear communication at every stage with the workers involved in the project, explaining to them their role and the way their work would be incorporated into their project. Beyond clear communication throughout the process, workers were fed hot meals in the same dining halls, were encouraged to ask questions, and were paid fairly. This runs counter to the Marxist critique of the "alienation of labor." The point is to achieve a goal, not to make a profit.



In the end, they achieved cultural capital and credibility, both of which were more valuable to them than financial capital. As Paul Harper says: "They've achieved a sophisticated interface between society's admiration for business, wealth and celebrity and the art system's theoretical disdain for it... The tension created by using both systems (socialism and capitalism) gives their work a particular vitality."<sup>142</sup>

### ***Participation***

For the Christos, the role of collaboration happens at the front end of their projects, not upon their opening to the public. Viewers do not "complete" their work, though everyone engaged up until a work's unveiling, does. Jeanne-Claude spoke of their projects:

The truth is that we do them for ourselves and for our collaborators. We do not do them for the public. If the public comes, that is a bonus. But it is not done for them. The only thing we do for them is to keep the project up a little bit longer than it would be otherwise... it doesn't take us fourteen days to enjoy them and be satisfied. We would save a lot of money in maintenance--maintenance team, repair team--if we were to say, "Okay, we've seen it, we were right, it's beautiful. Let's photograph it, film it." But that would be very egoistic. And that is why we keep it up longer for the

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

public. But you have to understand that for us, once the project is completed, and we have seen it fully and enjoyed it, the creative process is finished, it's ended."<sup>143</sup>

Ukeles, who primarily focused on her collaboration as an exchange with sanitation workers, also considered participation something that happens in the development of a project, not as an experience that happens after the work is installed. Both the Christos and Ukeles have a very particular take on participation, however. While the word connotes an open-ended, collaborative experience, the reality is that both artists envision a very particular kind of participation to enact their work. While a project may change over time dependent on the agents acting upon it, there is no doubt that behind the thousands of people involved are the firmly steering hands of an autonomous artist. These works are not community murals. The by-product for Ukeles is usually the performance itself, whereas for the Christos it has always taken the form of architectural objects sited in a particular way.

It must also be noted that there is a difference between the general "public" and the vast number of people involved in any given project.

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<sup>143</sup> Castro, "A Matter of Passion: A Conversation with Christo and Jeanne-Claude."

Jeanne-Claude defined a project's "publicness" by its reception; if the community hates the project and weren't made aware that it was going to occur, it's not public (remember Ukeles also doesn't believe her project at Fresh Kills is public until 1 million people have seen it). Christo defines public art in terms of public space. He explained that the artist inherits the elements inherent to a space; in other words, they do not create those inherent meanings but are challenged by them. Christo also likened their projects to architecture because of their high propensity to stir debate and require lengthy discussion in various kinds of public and private meetings.<sup>144</sup>

### ***Process***

The Christos are as well known for their persistence and patience as for their artwork. The meaning of their work is at least partially located in its bureaucratic proficiency, not the product of it, visually seductive though it may be. Instead their public art is "a brilliant public exhibition of administrative skill that makes the works themselves subsidiary to the organizational activity involved in their creation."<sup>145</sup> Jeanne-Claude in an interview said: "The process is part of the work, as much as a pregnancy is part of having a baby. Of course the process is very important, but it

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<sup>144</sup> Becker, "Conversing with Christo and Jeanne-Claude."

<sup>145</sup> Kastner, "Social Fabric."

has only one aim-to one day finally realize the project."<sup>146</sup> Elsewhere she stated that by the time of installation, the creative element of a project was finished for them.

Process for the Christos changed over the course of their career. In the beginning, as unknown artists, Christo's sketches and plans were "enriched by the very implausibility of the projects they envisioned."<sup>147</sup> As they became more successful it became more challenging to find sites where their work would be difficult to realize. One critic wrote that the realization of their large-scale projects turned questions into statements, thus killing the mystery and excitement present in the original drawings. "In the progression from concept to completion, the evocative becomes declarative."<sup>148</sup> Indeed many viewers (or participants, contestably) have found walking through their projects disappointing.

Over forty years, they realized eighteen projects and failed to get permission for thirty-eight. Jeanne-Claude once said: "when they ask us

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<sup>146</sup> Castro, "A Matter of Passion: A Conversation with Christo and Jeanne-Claude."

<sup>147</sup> Camnitzer, "From Christo to Hare Krishna."

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

how we can have so much patience, I always answer, it's not a matter of patience, it's a matter of passion."<sup>149</sup>

The artists tended to juggle several projects at once, in various stages of planning permission. That way, if one fell through or stalled, they could just focus on another one of many spinning plates. The negotiating process is something that Jeanne-Claude seemed to relish, while Christo has always been happy to make the visuals. Impact studies were an important strategy for them, and as Jeanne-Claude once claimed, the environmental impact study developed for *Running Fence* in 1979 (California) was the first time something like that had ever happened for an art project. In all of their projects they would go to countless public meetings and hearings.

One of the most satisfying “wins” for the Christos happened before they were able to wrap the Reichstag in Berlin. The Chancellor of Germany, Helmut Kohl, was vehemently against the project. Kohl publicly stated that he was sure the Christos would lose if the project was subjected to a roll call vote in parliament, as he had ordered his party to vote against

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<sup>149</sup> Castro, “A Matter of Passion: A Conversation with Christo and Jeanne-Claude.”

them. In the end, the Christos won the right to do their project by a majority of 69 votes – 292 in favor, 223 against, and 9 abstentions. Jeanne-Claude claims it was the only time in history that the creation of a work of art was decided by a debate and roll call vote in parliament.<sup>150</sup>



**Figure 45: Reichstag wrapped, Berlin. Image Fineberg 2004.**

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

Central Park is certainly no objection to the challenging site rule. I remain torn as to whether this aspect of their work actually has the power to transform planning and urban political processes, or whether its transformative power acts solely on the artistic egos of the Christos. They clearly relished the value of debate, which is certainly one of the highest possible potentials that public art offers, but did such debates actually enact long-term change for the future of a city like New York? Was the project's participatory aspect its most enduring legacy for people other than the Christos?

### **Site**

At a lecture at Pratt in 1980, the artists were asked why they refused to situate *The Gates* in an alternate location, like Prospect Park in Brooklyn, to which Jeanne-Claude answered: "Sir, did you marry the woman you loved, or an alternate woman?"<sup>151</sup> The Christos claimed their inspiration came from the original plans of Olmsted and Vaux, designers of Central Park at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Christo explained the site-specificity of *The Gates*: "The rectangular shape of the gates reflects the geometric grid pattern of hundreds of city

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<sup>151</sup> Tomkins, "The Gates to the City; Onward and Upward with the Arts."

blocks surrounding Central Park. This project-and all of our projects-are designed for a specific site. They engage profoundly with the people living in that site."<sup>152</sup> However many likened *The Gates* to a 21<sup>st</sup> century version of plop art. Like *Tilted Arc*, the wall-like gates transformed their site, but this time audiences found them delightful and acceptable; their ephemerality probably had as much to do with the levity of their acceptance than anything else.

An entirely artificial, manmade structure, much has been written about how the protectionist discourse surrounding the park stalled *The Gates* for 26 years. Tom Eccles of the Public Art Fund pointed to the mythology surrounding *The Gates* as the first time a public artwork was allowed to happen in Central Park. To the contrary, smaller but no less public and site-engaged works had occurred there, including and a project by Andrea Zittel called A-Z Desert Island, in 1999-2000, and a number of works during the 2004 Whitney Biennale.

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<sup>152</sup> Castro, "A Matter of Passion: A Conversation with Christo and Jeanne-Claude."





Figure 46: Jean-Claude and Christo. Image Christo 2005.

One reviewer gave Central Park credit for *The Gates*. He said:

One can ask why the Gates became such a festive social event-over and beyond the hype publicizing them-and the answer might be that it has to do with Central Park itself, a kind of Garden of Eden in the asphalt jungle. Anything placed in that sanctuary, the triumph of Robert Law Olmstead (and the model for Robert Smithson's "dialectical landscape," as

he called it), automatically becomes indeed central and sacred.<sup>153</sup>

The Central Parks Conservancy doesn't get much mention, but it was largely because of them that *The Gates* eventually happened; it had been steadily gaining in power since the 1980s and, as mentioned previously, took over the park's administration in 1998. Private organizations such as the CPC have been replicated all over the city, including at Madison Square Park and Bryant Park. Tom Finkelparl explained that he takes issue with such organizations; they alleviate the expectation that public funds are expected to improve public spaces, meaning that money begets money, and vice versa.

### ***Critical Response***

Most of the negative responses to *The Gates* came from art historians and critics. As the project had been conceived in 1979, it seemed to many reviewers to be out-of-date and thus an unfortunate choice. There also seemed to be a disappointed tone (mixed with a fascinated one) at the Christos transformation into a spectacle-maker, rather than artists per se.

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<sup>153</sup> Kuspit, "The Gates: The Ephemeral Monumentalized."

The increasing desire that the Christos had to reveal the dynamics of capitalism (while exploiting them self-mockingly) played into the spectacular becoming their signature, rather than any kind of mysterious speculative gesture.<sup>154</sup> One reviewer found the sycophancy of the guides, in tandem with the arrogance of the artists to take over such a huge public space, both staggering and depressing. He said:

In some respects it is comparable, aesthetically at least, to a person of very little distinction but with lots of money deciding to become president of a country and succeeding. When, against the odds, this delirium achieves its goal without the quality to back it up, the witness is left with only two options: to accept on faith, or to reject and feel left out. Most people seemed to have chosen acceptance and, walking through the arches, many people signaled their faith by wearing something orange... This is all about spectacle, not about personal following.<sup>155</sup>

According to W.J.T. Mitchell, many critics seemed irritated with the seeming refusal of *The Gates* to say anything at all or be in the least surprising. At first finding their ephemeral, trivial and innocuous nature bland but inoffensive, upon finding out that the Republican Party had been banned from demonstrating in the park several months earlier,

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<sup>154</sup> Camnitzer, "From Christo to Hare Krishna."

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

suddenly found the staging of *The Gates* disturbing and offensive. Art had now been rendered harmless and apolitical, returned to its original role as urban beautifier. If it had happened in 1979, when Central Park was actually a dangerous mess, the beauty of *The Gates* might have had more transformative power.<sup>156</sup>

Some reviewers were more mixed. They appreciated the generosity of spirit in *The Gates* and the pleasure that thousands received in visiting them. The money that would go to protecting the park and the revenues generated for vendors and local business-owners, not to mention New York City as a whole, was advantageous. The sense of the collective over the individual was also often recognized and appreciated, as was their playfulness at working in the public sphere. But as Hal Foster argued in the London Review of Books, *The Gates* was ultimately an organizational feat, not an artistic or political one.<sup>157</sup> The Christos, also happy to make works appealing the "masses," were not interested in making any overt political or interrogative statements with *The Gates*.

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<sup>156</sup> Mitchell, "Christo's Gates and Gilo's Wall."

<sup>157</sup> Foster, "In Central Park."

## **Public Response**

*The Gates* attracted thousands of art tourists; the fact that they had the power to do so is perhaps the most relevant feat the work accomplished vis a vis the “public.” Whether visitors were unimpressed, or unsure what the meaning was, or uncritical, the point is that they were there. One reviewer said that he heard very few responses while he was there that suggested people were moved by the experience. Instead he heard statistics being repeated and saw photo-ops at every turn. He wrote of the frightening epiphany he had at *The Gates* by describing the dawning realization that the experience was a mass moment of infantilization. Individual thought was suppressed in favor of a lowest common denominator sense of collectivity.<sup>158</sup> The comment he reportedly heard most often was “I don’t get it.” On the other hand the project had sparked dialogue, interest and joy, which are hard to deny as markers of success.<sup>159</sup> Tom Finkelpearl raved of the diversity of visitors, while another critic wrote that a spot check revealed the audience to be largely middle and upper middle class whites who made the journey to Central Park to visit *The Gates*.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> Camnitzer, “From Christo to Hare Krishna.”

<sup>159</sup> Wright, “All Smiles in Central Park.”

<sup>160</sup> Rapaport, “Inside the Gates.”

One of the least quantifiable positive public for the public was to offer a moment of healing for New Yorkers after 9/11. Reviewer Andrea Bellini said: “Placed at the heart of a city in constant motion, this grandiose and ultimately useless work became almost a symbol of hope.”<sup>161</sup>

I chose to include *The Gates* because, like *Tilted Arc*, it represents a moment for public art when certain issues crystallized. The economic incentivization of art had been growing for some time, but with *The Gates* it was finally made fully explicit that public art could be as much a draw as other spectacle-driven events. It is also an interesting case for its supposed entanglement with urban bureaucracy, though this needs to be more closely examined than I believe it is. The fetishization of political process on the part of an artist does not inherently connote a transformed relationship between the two.

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<sup>161</sup> Bellini, “New York Tales: Reflections in a Glass Curtain.”

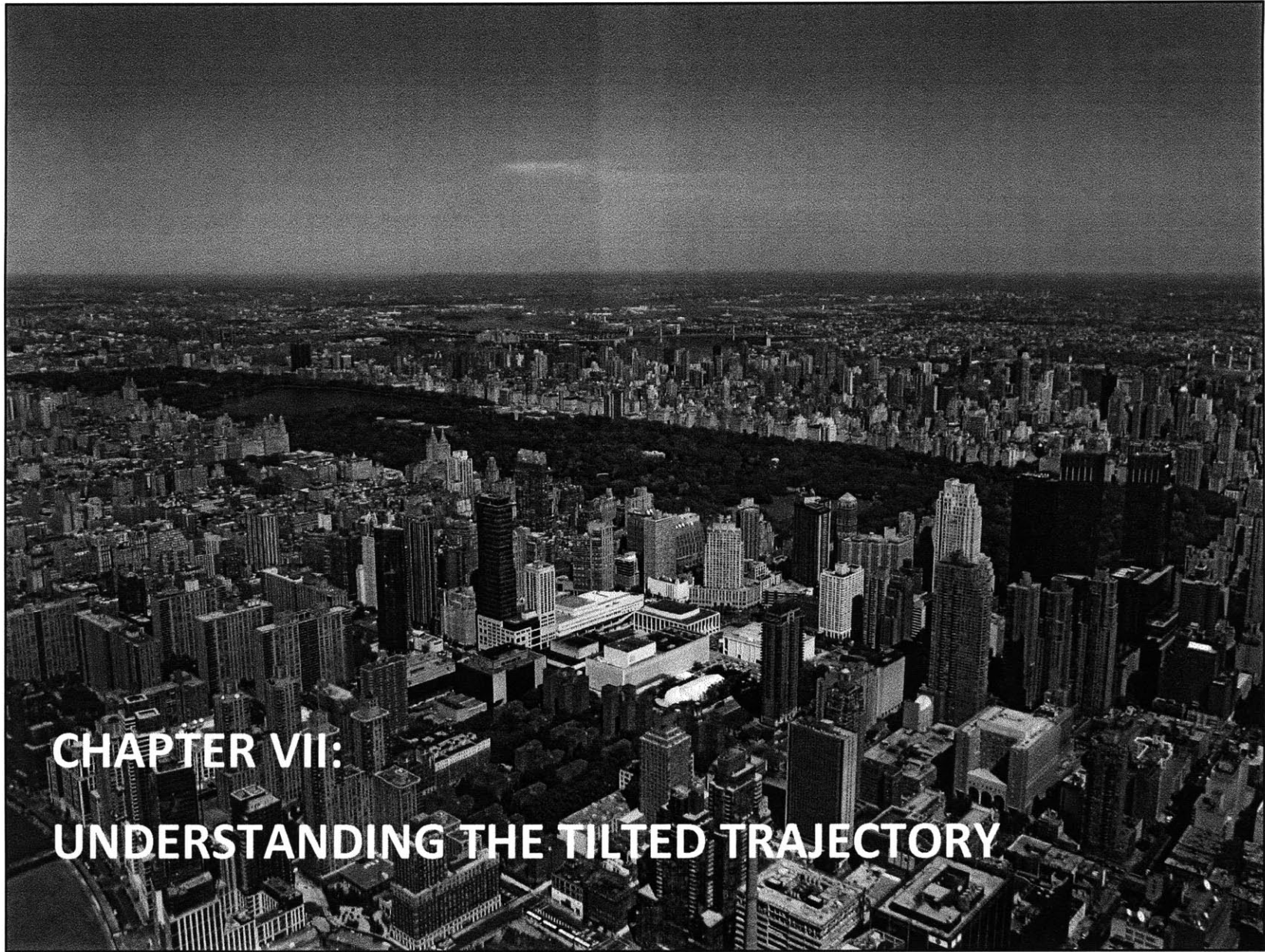




**Figure 47: Central Park, aerial view**

As the most recent case study, *The Gates* remain at the forefront of people's minds when they think about what public art can do for a city like New York. It set a precedent so large in scale that most other proposals are now dwarfed in comparison and thus easier to approve. *The Gates* certainly cemented faith in the idea of *temporary* public art and the public's interest in collective experience.

And yet *The Gates* was not an easily replicable project. In 2008 the Public Art Fund, in conjunction with the City, staged Olafur Eliasson's *NYC Waterfalls*. Also an enormously expensive project (\$15.5 million), and one that was complicated by complicated engineering, *The Waterfalls* consisted of four manmade "waterfalls" sited along New York's East River, which lit up at night. The project didn't really work, mesmerization levels were low, and all parties hushed the project up pretty quickly when it was finished. So what was it about *The Gates* that so specifically worked? The benefit of going first ought not to be overlooked. Diminishing returns count in art as well. For public art to work it needs to surprise. It needs to prove something that once seemed impossible, while also tapping into something that no one knew they needed. *The Gates* was an irreplaceable success as an event, but as instigator its true success has yet to be measured.



**CHAPTER VII:  
UNDERSTANDING THE TILTED TRAJECTORY**

At first glance the four works chosen as case seem to vary considerably from one another. Created and installed in different decades, in different locations and produced by different means, these projects by Serra, Ukeles, Jones/Ginzel and the Christos at points seemed too disparate to analyze side-by-side. On developing a closer familiarity with the cases however, I realized such diversity could be a potential analytic strength. Not only does it reaffirm the slippery impossibilities of defining public art, but it also suggests that drawing out certain common issues reveals that all public art projects, no matter how different they may be on the surface, face certain invariable issues.

Questions of form and site, process, audience and intention, are present in each case study. As such this chapter focuses on what I've concluded are the fundamental issues with which public art grapples, and then posits new ways to implement "lessons learned" from the four projects with future public art projects. In order to suggest new hybrid models in which public art and urban planning may be brought together in a more meaningful way, it's been necessary to explicitly tease out what choices have and have not worked for public art historically. My hope has been to discover what "public art can uniquely do," while also considering how this might be better facilitated through urban planning.

After parsing the essential issues into three umbrella categories: form, process, and audience, I ask how each of these case studies either answers or relates to the questions raised by each issue, and then devote the final aspects of this thesis to considering the explicit dynamic between urban planning and public art as it currently stands, as well as suggesting how it might ideally evolve. I lay out three of the most crucial changes that I believe need to occur between urban planning and public art. These incorporate lessons from some of the case studies' most glaring failures and/or missed opportunities, as well as encourage us to build upon new kinds of public art success. Nascent examples of new models, concepts and methodologies for public art are all around us and as urban planners we need to continue seeking such examples, and then ask how we can support and reinforce them within urban planning and policymaking as we move forward.

**Figure 48: New York aerial view over Central Park**

## I. FORM

Public art can take many forms, but its most common association remains a sculpture, on a plinth, in a public area. As one of the main aims of this thesis has been to question whether or not this form is still viable, the role of this sub-section is to tease out what the significance of public art's form may be, and also to consider how its form relates to other urban processes, such as architecture. The interactivity of public art is one largely (though of course not exclusively) related to the issue of form, and as such highlights how form also impacts ideas about audience and implementation as well.

Three out of the four case studies in this thesis take on a similar, traditional form. Although differing in duration, *Tilted Arc* (meant to be permanent but removed), *Metronome* (permanent), and *The Gates* (temporary), all three sculptural projects adhere to an object-based idea for public art. How did this choice affect viewer perception and interest with each piece? To what extent can form be blamed or given credit for the successes and failures of these three cases? The size and heft of *Tilted Arc* and *Metronome* should not be underestimated in both projects' failure to capture the public imagination. *The Gates* were pieces of orange fabric that bent and swayed with the wind, expressing

their ephemerality both in form and in duration. While they engaged visitors, they did not confront or challenge them. Walking through and around them was not an insult, as it seemed to be to many with *Tilted Arc*.

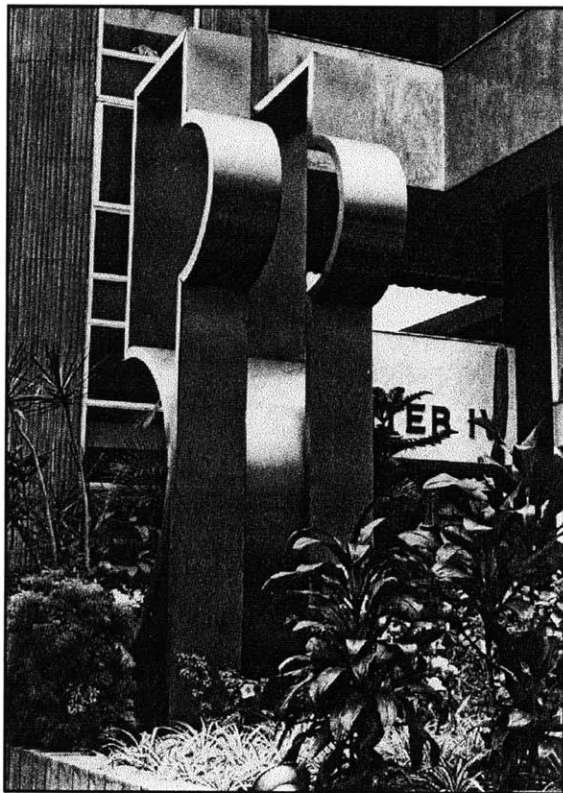
For Ukeles, public art as performance means that participants *are* the objects themselves, thus her work only exists when certain groups of people become it. Her form is participation; her art is co-creation. Ukeles' version of participation, by way of Creative Time's ideas about social practice represent what I believe to be one of the most powerful directions that public art can head in the future. The latter's *Key to the City* (summer 2010) was successful, fun, non-commercial, temporary, and managed to balance collaboration with a sense of individual experience. This kind of project was directly site specific, as viewers were given keys to "unlock" sites in all boroughs, and yet the idea is universal enough to be replicated elsewhere.

The negative stereotyping of permanent sculptures in public places has ramifications beyond any limitations directly attributable to the form. In other words, public art's image problem is an equally valid justification to redefine the genre. The reality is that very few people care about

public art. It doesn't appeal to most artists and the larger "art world," nor does it mean very much to most of the people whose siting it is presumed to affect – nearby residents, for example – unless it's offensive or affects property values. Every time we plop another modernist sculpture in a public space, I believe we do injustice to the actual potential that integrating art into the public sphere contains.

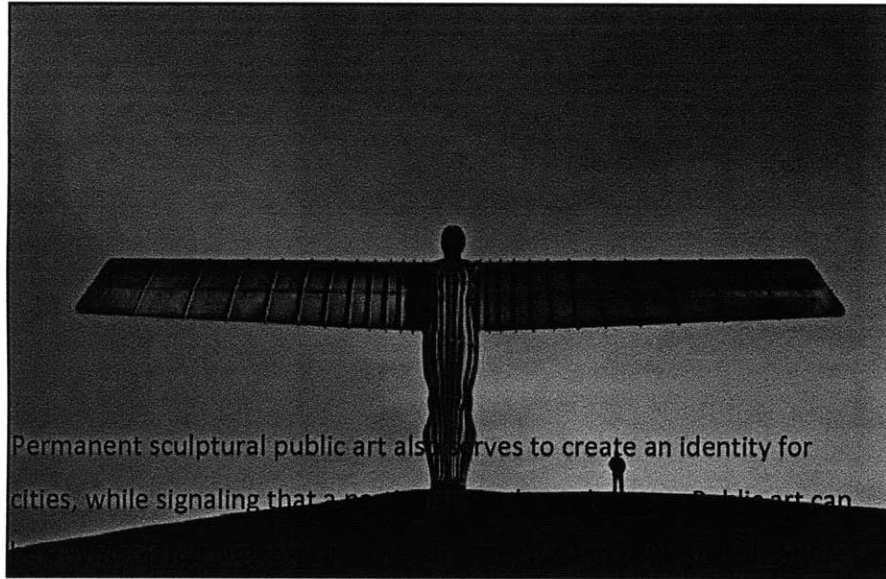
And yet we must ask: is there some positive element of this traditional form worth preserving? Many of traditional public art's challenges come from their likeness and relationship to architecture.

**Figure 49: Bad public art?**  
Rio de Janeiro. Image  
Redstone 1981.



*Tilted Arc* purposely competed with the buildings in Federal Plaza. *Metronome* covers the entire wall of a building in Union Square. The historical attempts to combine architects and artists on design teams together have largely failed. It's possible that the only reason architects hold more power aesthetically in a city like New York is bureaucratic proficiency. But this is in fact a major issue when it comes to controlling, even temporarily, public spaces.

Permanent sculptural public art has the benefits that only longevity can accord. Its context can change over time, subtly altering the affect that the piece has within its site and on viewers. For example, *Metronome* has been in Union Square since the late 1990s. Although the area's major transformation had occurred in the prior decade, Union Square has also been swept up in the broader changes that have occurred in New York in the last fifteen years. New York University's rapid real estate development moves in the area have particularly affected neighboring areas. *Metronome* has the possibility of becoming an icon, a distinction not solely restricted to objects that are universally appreciated on an aesthetic level.



**Figure 50: Antony Gormley's *Angel of the North* is a hugely successful public art story, attracting thousands of tourists annually and a factor in the revitalization of the downtrodden town of Gateshead in the north of England (1998).**

psychologically. It suggests a particular process that had to happen; a bureaucratic war that was worth trudging through. The value of playing hard to get, the delayed gratification of an often slow, strategic and consolidated effort is embodied in many public art projects. Permanent sculptures, although laden with negative stereotypes, also have the paradoxical benefit of history. Maintaining the trajectory and canon of permanent public art may have long-term benefits if we can find a way to evolve the genre without devolving it.

Both a process (next sub-section) and form issue, the question of duration for public art is an important, or at least “loud,” one. Is temporary work a concession to the difficulties of creating permanent public artwork? Is it a weaker, conciliatory version of the same thing or a strategic and equally effective alternative? Temporary work can still (and often is) be a sculptural object. The Public Art Fund’s *Andy Monument* is one such example. The question is, if it only sits temporarily is it still engaging with its contextual built environment in the same way as say, *Metronome*? Duration may be more of a tactical question than one of efficacy; a temporary project isn’t better because of its duration, it’s just more likely to happen in the first place. Duration is both form and not-form, and its relevance may be regularly misplaced as one of quality instead of strategy.

The work that Mierle Laderman Ukeles creates within New York’s Department of Sanitation takes on an entirely different form to the other three projects. Her work is slow, consistent, and long-term. It is invisible yet pervasive. It appears to be more humble than the other projects, and yet its integrative nature reveals a confident approach.

Ukeles' work strives for seamless unity with everyday life, whereas the relationship of an art object to a human is inherently separate. We must consider how the traditional aspect of public art as a visual object isn't necessarily its most prescient form. Also, is there something inherently confrontational about objects in space? Are they by their very nature set up in opposition to human beings? By declaring that maintenance, or process itself is art, Ukeles subverts the possibility that her art can be ignored -- it is everything that we do, not a commentary on it.

Performance art as form, as compared to sculpture, is the subject for an art history thesis in a different department, but it suffices to say the idea of audience is markedly different. The expectation of viewers is for them to be active and creative, not receptive or possibly even confrontational. For Ukeles form is directly related to process, as it was for Jean-Claude and Christo, an attribute that complicates and enriches their art's interaction with urban politics and planning.

## II. PROCESS

Process has two possible meanings in relation to public art. On the one hand, it relates to the actual processes of commissioning, implementing and evaluating projects, and on the other it is a question of how the

process itself is (or is not) integral to the actual work in question. All four case studies inevitably partake to varying degrees in both of the word's possible meanings. As process is also very important for urban planning, the idea becomes an illuminating framework within which to consider the existent – and possible future – of the relationship between the two fields. How can procedural processes enliven and support artistic ones?



**Figure 51: Jean-Claude in public meeting, 1980. Image Fineberg 2004.**

Public art has been subject to the worst effects of which bureaucracy is capable. It often seems that public art's biggest challenge is to remain interesting in light of urban politics and the quagmire of its rules and

regulations. Intentions, meaning, effects and audience become secondary to this often-overwhelming stumbling block. Risk is a greater consideration than reward. *Tilted Arc* certainly accelerated this tendency, which was nevertheless growing during the same time period. The GSA commission was one of the last major projects that would be able to get away with no outside consultations, thorough contracts or urban planning regulations. Twenty-five years later, *The Gates* emblemizes certain related shifts. The two are not a perfect comparison, as *The Gates* also occurred under a highly sympathetic mayor and was a temporary project, but in a way this serves my point even more strongly – the “red tape” for *The Gates* was extremely high in spite of these seemingly unobstructed circumstances.

As Creative Time’s Anne Pasternak wrote:

The process of commissioning a public work of art can add further barriers to creativity. All too often members of the judging panel lack expertise and vision, and when a selection is made and presented to the local community, it is most often brutally dissected. While I respect that in theory public forums could bring out interesting and even exciting results, the truth is that more often than not they are not a place where democracy performs at its best.

Electoral politics further get in the way of successful public art commissioning. There are countless examples of political cronyism resulting in the selection of ill-qualified artists. Many communities have witnessed a moment when public dissent over a work of art has resulted in their political leaders throwing the project under the proverbial bus rather than leading an engaged discussion about the offending work, let alone a defense of an artist’s First Amendment right to free expression.<sup>162</sup>

Pasternak’s first comment about subpar judging panels seconds Dale Lanzzone’s belief about one of public art within urban policy’s main problems: those assigned to dealing with public art within planning or policy departments are often just that – assigned, not specifically designated curators or those with expertise about art itself. While an ideal hybrid seems to me an echo of the Ukeles model: plant artists within public agencies, in this case art producers, the aforementioned challenges of professional silos remains a hindrance. It has proven impossible to develop umbrella public art policies for a city like New York. Individuals making these choices vary from administration to administration, and “expert consultants” brought in also change from project to project and between administrations. The impossibility of a consistent public art policy, not subject to political whims, is one of the

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<sup>162</sup> Pasternak, “Short-term solutions to a permanent problem.”



genre's biggest tragedies but also one of its most appealing qualities. It is slippery and changeable, and by attempting to elude the grasp of urban rules whilst operating within the rich terrain of public space is one reason that I believe more and more artists ought to (and fortunately already are) become interested in this kind of practice.

So how can the four case studies in this thesis be situated within the complexities of such political processes? With *The Gates*, Jean-Claude and Christo both fought with, and relished as part of the work, dealing with urban politicians and planners. *The Gates* was not a commissioned work, thus its long implementation forms the bulk of its entanglement with procedural process. Indeed many artists who find satisfaction by working in the public realm do so by integrating such bureaucratic challenges into their work. This has of course always been a large part of Ukeles' work as well. *Tilted Arc's* failure is at least partially to blame on its isolated process. A small group of people within the GSA chose Serra without consulting any of the site's other stakeholders, and then installed the massive piece without any accompanying explanation or warnings. It was the last time a major piece of public art would be allowed to develop in a public space without involving public feedback and soliciting approval from outside interests.

*Metronome* faced similar problems, although as a private commission and one that was just plain ugly -- but not confrontational -- in its intention, it has ended up with public art's lesser failure: irrelevance. But the producers of the sculpture *tried* to bring in "experts" -- the Public Art Fund, the Municipal Arts Society -- and chose artists who had only ever made work that was likeable enough, so how did even this work fail? How could its producers not have balked at a design from the get-go that almost no members of the public would ever like? This commissioning model still exists and I would guess, still prevails in the vast majority of cities, the only difference being a perhaps well-intentioned, yet token attempt to consult the public (in a public meeting for example). So if projects that essentially don't consult a wider audience fail, and ones that do are so watered down if not stagnated to eventual death, how can we make any claims at all about what kind of public art choices work best?

One of the overlooked failures of public art production has been its ill evaluation. Most evaluation of public art is economic -- based on figures such as related spending and tourist revenue -- but little else has been done to measure the impact of most public art. As it seems so many of its other benefits are ambiguous, personal and/or unquantifiable, this is

to some degree understandable. On the other hand, this lack of evaluation creates a lack of evolution. There is scant historical material for the producers of new public artwork to work from and with. It is difficult to measure improvement when the original form no longer exists nor any documentation relating to it.

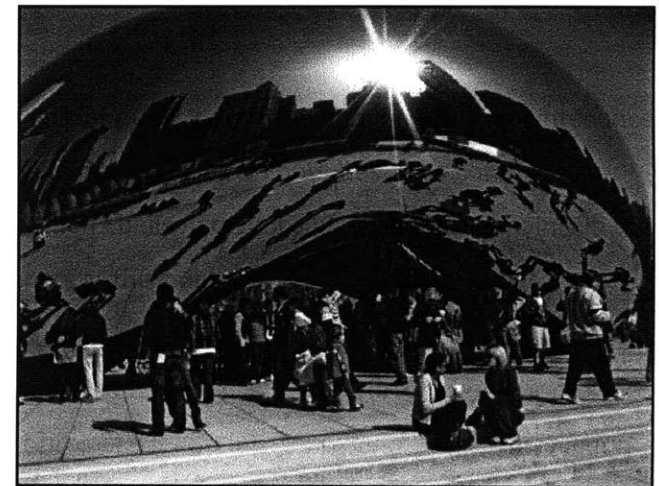
This major problem is related to another flaw almost universal to the production of public art: the lack of long-term care and maintenance programs for public art. Funds are rarely set aside to care for even permanent public works, leaving scattered work in cities everywhere in a state of disrepair and neglect. This obviously contributes to public art's image problem. Urban planners are trained to create long-term strategies and need to think more carefully about this aspect of public art during commissioning processes.

Process, in both definitions of the term as it relates to public art, may be the most important consideration for how best to advance public art. I believe the only legitimate reason that an artist can be blamed for the failure of a public work is if it doesn't connect to its context or to a community. All other failures are failures of the commissioning and administrative processes: flawed selection processes (including poorly

chosen panels), and lack of public education and long-term maintenance. If the hope is that meaningful public art continues to be commissioned by the public sphere, then I believe responsibility should lie mainly in the hands of urban planners at this point.

Process as an idea and an event works with the current tendency toward ephemeral public art projects. It also inherently encourages interaction between audience members, and allows for an open-endedness that I believe is a very important criteria for art. Prescriptive public art rarely moves the public anymore. Citizens need to be encouraged to play and engage, not just learn and observe like a school history lesson.

**Figure 52:**  
**Kapoor's *Cloud Gate***  
**(Chicago), a**  
**successful work of**  
**public art (2004-6)**

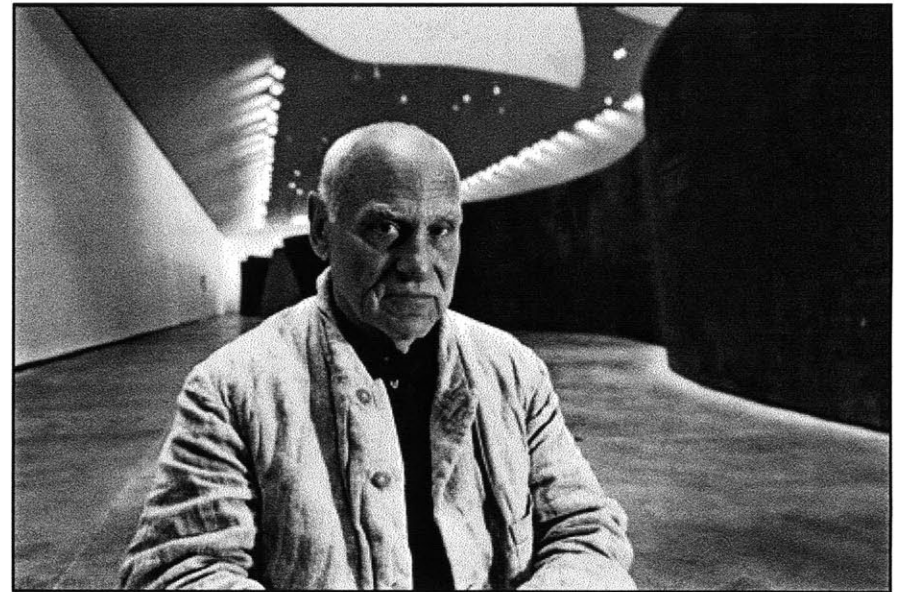


### III. AUDIENCE/INTENTION

Placing the word public before the word art reveals the genre's fundamental (reason for being.) The word "art" alone suggests the possibility of an intimate, potentially furtive experience. It allows for individual gesture and expression, an experience that can be justified as being the artist's alone. Of course trying to define the word "art" would be impossible, but one unassailable meaning is the idea that an individual produces art in order to "express" him or herself, to unload and describe some sort of human experience. In contrast, public art demands conversation. Like a tree in the proverbial forest, does public art even exist until an audience has engaged with it?

By its very siting – in public space – this kind of art enters into discourse with "big" issues such as democracy and collective consciousness, as well as with questions of control and political power. This kind of art is no longer allowed the luxury of conversing solely with the art world or museumgoers; it has entered the messier, bigger realm of public space. Thus intentions for a public artwork must include a consideration of audience that other kinds of art can afford to ignore. *Tilted Arc* worked within art historical discourse, but Serra's unwillingness to understand that the sculpture's regular viewers might not want to add new

psychological and physical challenges to their daily routine, was the piece's undoing.



**Figure 53: Richard Serra**

Richard Serra's audience was fundamentally his own ego. His intention, supported by a small GSA panel, was to disrupt and reveal the flawed design and experience of Federal Plaza. At no point was Serra interested in entering into conversation with the work's dissenters. The missed opportunity of *Tilted Arc* is that it did not encourage either side to ask

deeper questions about the meaning or potential for public art. It very quickly descended into “us” versus “them,” with Serra’s seeming arrogance eclipsing the more interesting questions that lay beneath the surface.

With *The Gates* the Christos essentially did the same thing, but brought in enough co-conspirators to give the work the illusion of success. In a way they were even less generous to the piece’s audience, admitting that visitors were not necessary to complete the work. With *Tilted Arc*, viewers completed the work but in doing so were seemingly degraded – they had to walk further to get their destination, they were shown as lemming-like government employees, their daily architectural experience was revealed as a mortifying one.

The Christos turned audience on its head in a novel, and thus interesting way. While I believe the duo is given way too much credit for their interaction with stakeholders during the production of their pieces – ultimately their work remains intact formally and is mostly uncompromised to the end – by creating conversations and forcing their naysayers to develop rationales to justify their opposition, the success of their work depends on their ability to stir up dialogue. Their art lies in

the possibility of changing minds. Unfortunately by the time *The Gates* occurred, the Christos were such an international success that Bloomberg needed no convincing, which weakens what would have been the work’s biggest strength. The fact that it took twenty-six years for a sympathetic mayor to come into power means that the Christos were ultimately more patient than persuasive.



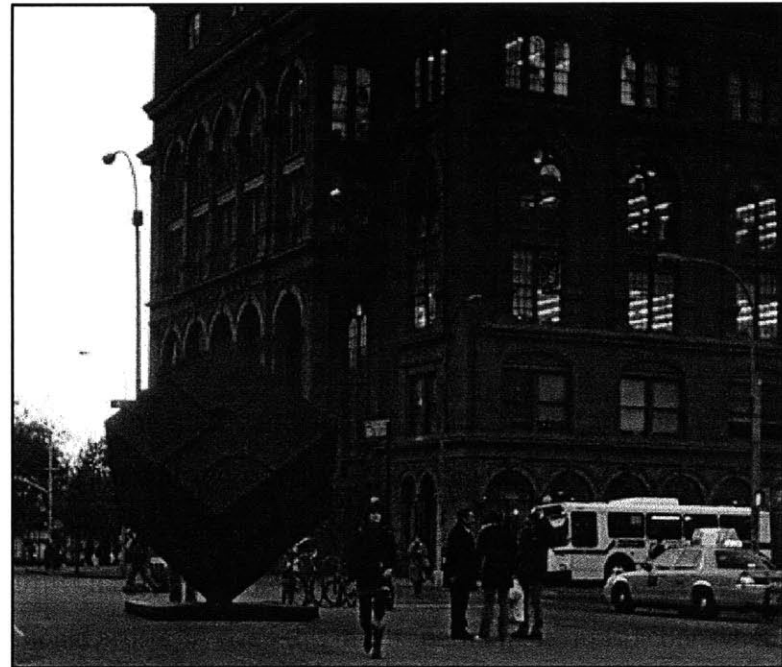
**Figure 54: The Christos with Mayor Bloomberg. Image Christo 2005.**

Skepticism aside, for a public art project it is remarkable how diverse an audience *The Gates* attracted. In spite of its form – essentially hundreds

of sculptural objects – visitors felt as though they were interacting with the piece. Did anyone feel as though the pieces of fabric were an obstacle in trying to get from A to B? Is it because of their ephemerality, or their siting in a park (as opposed to an office center) that this *Tilted Arc* argument was irrelevant for *The Gates*? The conservative, city beautification element of *The Gates* is understandably more palatable than a hulking piece of metal with urine and graffiti all over it. Although *Tilted Arc* appears graceful and monumental in photographs (particularly aerial ones), what most people now associate with the piece is a cold and dirty slab of urban debris in 1980s New York.

*Metronome* established an old-fashioned dichotomy between art and audience. Jones and Ginzel believed they were creating a timeless meditation on universal human themes, one that could and would be appreciated by any and all passerby. *Metronome* evokes some similar issues with audience to *Tilted Arc*. Both are very “serious” pieces that establish expectations of the audience that come to seem arrogant and overbearing. Tom Otterness’ (see Figure 30) playful work is extremely popular. Are these artists asking too much of citizens or are we asking too little when we deem them failures? Should it be a universal responsibility to

question the spaces and decisions made around and for us? Is voting a moral and/or ethical responsibility? *Tilted Arc* and *Metronome* expect audiences to engage with the questions their artists have put forth, these questions are far from co-created. Should artists be given this much “permanent” jurisdiction when it comes to public space? Should anyone?



**Figure 55: Rosenthal’s *Cube*: an iconic piece of art that marks Astor Place.**

With public art, the first questions asked need to be about audience. Intentions need to include more thorough consideration about the stakeholders, or audience for any given piece. This cannot be an afterthought for work in the public sphere. Public art producers need to emphasize consideration about how people will be engaged with the work. Are there ways to maximize interest without being overly prescriptive about how this might happen? Is the intention to provoke or transform the audience, even temporarily? Or is the goal to please them, amplifying the beautiful and/or celebratory aspects of our shared experience? Answers vary as much as definitions for public art vary, but the most important part is to reverse the directionality of thinking. Artists working in the public sphere need to learn how to put “them” before “us.” When done successfully, many artists have even found that doing so benefits them in greater measure than if they had started out trying to please themselves.

## URBAN PLANNING AND PUBLIC ART

The relationship between public art and urban planning is currently convoluted, inefficient and ineffective. Both professions continue struggling to self-define in the face of older, more established ancillary practices (i.e. architecture) and a constantly changing set of urban

dynamics. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century both urban planning and public art were able to establish clear codes and ways of working – urban planning existed to plan and organize cities, while public art’s job was to beautify them and please the public.

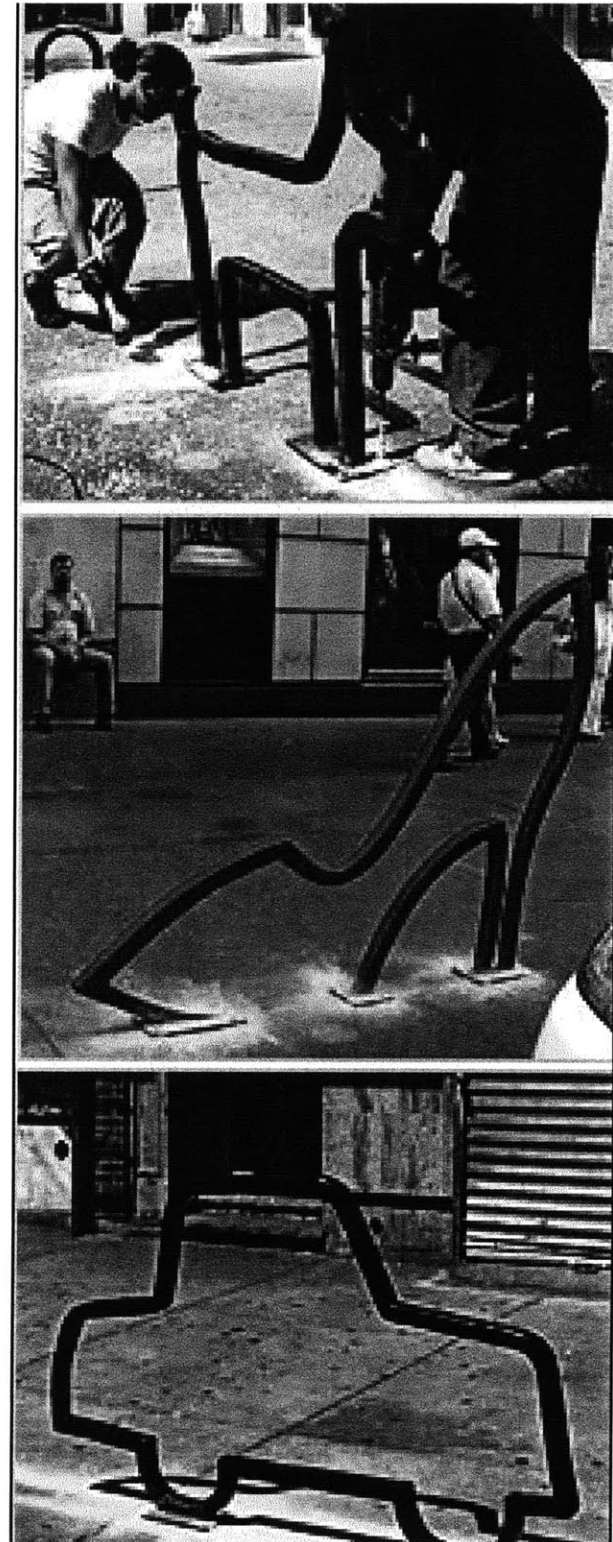
Since then both have been subject to a loss of faith, been vilified when not ignored, and spent long periods of time mired in reconfigurations. This somewhat sorrowful acknowledgement belies what is actually this thesis’ most optimistic vision for the future: two renewed professions whose changeability is moreover about flexibility, and whose potential to collaborate in the service of our future cities can, and needs to grow. This subsection is a reflection on how the chosen case studies reveal (disconnects) between urban planning and public art, and then suggests hopes and potential means for how to improve collaboration between the two fields in the future.

One would be hard pressed to find a planner who would argue for less public art, but just as hard pressed to find one who thinks about it critically and with as having any function beyond the “prettying up” of unattractive, dysfunctional areas. Public art has been a band-aid for the mistakes made by professionals working in the built environment. Most

urban planners look at public art prescriptively, seeking to involve artists at the point where some predetermined project has to be implemented. Artistic methodology eludes most professionals working in a city agency, and the open-endedness of an artwork's ends (if not its means as well), is mysterious rather than illuminating of alternative approaches.

How did we get here? Public art is made worse by city processes, not better. Public art projects are expected to please everyone, and as such tend to please no one. To reiterate, art made outside the studio is not about individual expression; public art is a collective project. And yet diluting an artist's original vision through numerous rounds of public consultation ends up turning public artworks into watered down, dare I say often meaningless, "turds in the plaza." Just as problematic is what this does to artists, often without advocates, many of whom do one public art project in a career and never return to it again.

Urban planners have become comfortable with artful solutions applied to urban design (i.e. bike racks designed by artists, see Figure 54), which is a step in the right direction. New York City's innovative Urban Arts program through the Department of Transportation (DOT), solicits



**Figure 56: David Byrne bike racks, NYC. Image Chan, *The New York Times* 2008.**

applications for temporary art projects on jersey barriers, construction fences, plazas and other typically unattractive urban sites.

This is a creative solution to improve an otherwise uncontested piece of property, and has more in common with the architect-artist teams of the 1980s than it does with *Metronome*, for example. A positive outcome of the program is that it allows more artists to produce and show their work, and as a temporary program has the advantage of being low risk. Would it be possible to push this accepted program a step further, with urban planners and other officials using their unique intermediary position to fight for complicated, interesting and possibly challenging art as well?

Paradoxically one of the strangest problems that public art faces is one of heightened expectations. To reiterate Sara Selwood's comment from this thesis' first paragraph: "Expansive claims are made for public art."<sup>163</sup> Public art is routinely expected to save cities or areas that are otherwise in a state of decline. This problem has been reinforced by the spillover effect of projects like Frank Gehry's Bilbao museum in Spain, a building that became so popular as to be credited with saving its namesake city.

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<sup>163</sup> Selwood, *The Benefits of Public Art in Britain*.

"The Bilbao effect" has proven more anomalous than many would hope, its success not inherently replicable elsewhere.

This prescriptive idea for public art, either as urban doctor or last-ditch afterthought, is directly related to its regular failure to impress. This prescriptiveness is then extended to the expectation that art's role is to make people happy, not just engage them. While I think this is one possibility, and that public art shouldn't be consigned to some sort of solely unpleasant and provocative role, having pleasure as the main criteria for a piece of public art is constrictive. Similarly, I believe the job of urban planners is to help create lively and interesting cities, not just playgrounds for shopping and eating.

New York's High Line project – a park borne from a former elevated freight railroad line (see Figure 55) – has been widely regarded as extremely successful. It has spurred real estate development in the area and created a new destination area within tightly controlled Manhattan. While I also applaud many aspects of the projects, I find something unsettling about the fact that most new development consists of expensive clothing and retail stores, and neighboring areas are no doubt undergoing many of the unpleasant side effects of classic gentrification.



The High Line has whiffs of Battery Park City's development in the 1980s, one in which art was used to disguise and subvert many of the harsher realities of the changes that were occurring. It also resonates of the changes in Union Square that Sharon Zukin has lamented in several of her books, and represents the most recent iteration of the art plus commerce mechanism at work in New York City.

The line between public art that contributes to gentrification and public art that contributes to a dynamic and engaged civic sphere is a fine one. When I asked one of Creative Time's producers how he felt about the fact that so many formerly undeveloped areas where the group trail blazed as sites for art are now fully gentrified, he responded tentatively but with the admission that this was, and seemed destined to continue to be, an unresolved issue. Everyone at Creative Time held on to an awareness of his or her possible cooption in the neoliberalization of New York City. Absconding from such participation is a complicated matter.

Curators and producers from Creative Time seemed particularly enthusiastic about Mierle Laderman Ukeles' work. This makes sense to some obvious extent, as she's the only artist of my four case studies to have worked directly with Creative Time several times in the past. Her

ideas about social practice and participatory art are more supported than ever before within the organization, and it is interesting to consider Creative Time's *Key to the City* from 2010 side by side with Ukeles' *Cleansing the Bad Names* from 1984.<sup>164</sup> The organization also recently staged a Beckett play in post-Katrina New Orleans, necessitating an unavoidable emphasis on the city's ongoing urban problems. Anecdotally, one Creative Time producer spoke to me of how his public art interests were currently dovetailing more often with urban planners than architects, a reversal that would have been considered unprecedented when *Tilted Arc* was commissioned.

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<sup>164</sup> *Cleansing the Bad Names* was a performance piece that occurred outside of the Ronald Feldman Gallery on Mercer Street in SoHO in 1984. Ukeles had nearly 200 public officials remove windows that had been defaced with slurs and pejorative names that sanitation workers admitted to being routinely called.



**Figure 57: The High Line, New York City. Image *New York Times* 2010.**

## NEXT STEPS

Public art is conceptually complex, nebulous and multifaceted. If we can find the answers to some of public art's most salient questions, I believe we will be well on our way to finding the answers to many of society's deeper and seemingly more pressing issues. But putting the larger questions aside, it is imperative that we also seek possible changes and/or experiments that we can begin implementing immediately. What small steps can—and should—we as urban planners, policymakers and public art producers start to take? What do four varying case studies reveal to be most relevant, universal characteristics of public art for cities? What aspects should we fight to maintain, while agreeing to discard others as vestigial?

### ***Balance autonomy and engagement***

It is essential that artists be given a high degree of autonomy, while also being expected to make art whose fundamental purpose is to engage the public. This is a difficult balance to strike and requires placing faith in individuals. Without a degree of autonomy though, artists will never produce their best work. As urban planners we need to trust the artistic process, much as we've learned to trust our own rules and regulations. Too often the two are unjustifiably stereotyped as in opposition; this isn't inevitable. Ukeles' work is an

excellent example of how this balance can be located. The majority of the time her work is about process itself. This allows Ukeles to direct and set the parameters of her projects, while also requiring that public participants enact the work.

Another way is to continue seeking ways to subject public art to consultation without getting lost and bogged down in bloated processes. *Metronome* strove for this but failed, somewhat inconceivably. Public Art Fund and the Municipal Arts Society (MAS) were consulted ad hoc and as part of the selection panel, and yet a design was approved for which no public vote of confidence can be found. This consultation method is fairly commonplace today; the Times Square Arts Alliance uses it (with a rotating board of arts-knowledgeable members who gather for regular meetings to vet potential projects), as do many other non-profit public art-producing bodies. The NYC Department of Cultural Affairs, which runs the city's ongoing Percent for Art program, relies on outside consultants, but all projects must also still pass through various rounds of public meetings.

*The Gates* are a good (albeit also exceptional) case of artistic autonomy with some compromise. Although they refused to

consider any location other than Central Park, they were willing to change the make-up of the stakes to above-ground posts which posed no hint of possible damage to Central Park's earthen landscape. For twenty-six years they contended with the Central Parks Conservancy and unsympathetic park commissioners, but ultimately were granted permission by mayoral fiat. *The Gates* were consistent with the ethos of the Christos, while also managing to engage vast swathes of the public. Can we attribute this to the piece's form alone? Or can we attribute its success to timing (post-9/11 New York City) or a successful marketing campaign under the Bloomberg administration?

Richard Serra was given absolute artistic autonomy. A small committee of "experts" evaluated *Tilted Arc* but the artist was chosen primarily for his celebrity status above any other criteria. This model had outlasted its relevance by the time it was commissioned. The larger public no longer valued the methodologies employed by the likes of Picasso and Calder in their public spaces. The fact that Serra was so unabashedly disinterested in what anyone outside of the art world thought would no longer fly. Members of the public were in the process of reclaiming how their public spaces would be used while also operating under a rapidly

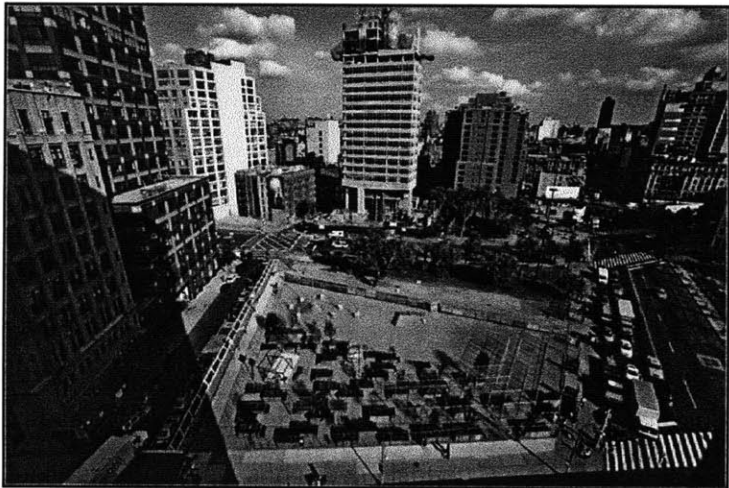
changing political economy. The 1980s were as confusing a time for urban planning as for public art; I'd venture to consider the period a veritable "rock bottom" from which we continue struggling to emerge.

### ***Broaden the definition of public art***

Public art needs to be relieved of the pressure to define itself unitarily, and even be given license to encourage such elusive definability. Thus perhaps public art as we move into the 21<sup>st</sup> century could be considered as broadly as "anything orchestrated by an artist(s) that moves us to consider our relationship to each other and to our collective consciousness through process, observation or interaction with others."

Its best effects are largely immeasurable (unless one counts making money for cities as public art's highest potential), and increasingly its successful examples are temporary and process-oriented. Permanent, object-oriented public art rarely moves people and I believe we should strongly consider whether this form still has relevance. As city budgets are squeezed and even the most strategic artists struggle in the face of constrictive urban policies governing public space, let's continue to invent new meanings for public art. Interim uses are also great places for public art to engage. A triangle

of land in Manhattan was recently lent by its owner/developer to create LentSpace. In conjunction with the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, the space was programmed with arts and cultural activities to make use of a vacant parcel of land awaiting development (see Figure 56). This “in the meantime” use, like the DOT’s Urban Arts program, is an excellent way to increase the pervasiveness of public art in a city like New York, one which is constantly in transition. As public art producers and urban planners we need to work with the fact that rational comprehensive models for city planning have failed us. This is more liberating than disappointing. Art is at its best as a dynamic, ever-changing and responsive act, not a prescriptive one.



**Figure 58: LentSpace in lower Manhattan. Image *New York Times* 2009.**

Although graffiti continues to be illegal, its cultural status has become increasingly accepted and considered. With its roots as an underground, inherently political and provocative art form, graffiti is public art that exists to disobey. In a way the DOT’s program serves a similar purpose, with a changed notion of site. The defacement of private property is obviously not the point; the DOT sites are politically uncharged and most of the time owned by the agency itself. The blurring and integration of many of graffiti’s principles into public art that is not only accepted but commissioned by government agencies, is an interesting development. Does it legitimize, eclipse or operate in a different sphere entirely from its illegal counterpart?

### ***Consolidate and Refine Public Art Strategy within Urban Policy***

It is crucial to acknowledge that public art is inherently political – just like urban planning. One of the biggest challenges is how to reinforce the value of something within urban policy that has so far worked best as a scattershot, strategic and spontaneous occurrence. Is the idiosyncratic nature of public art success and failure inherent, or is this something that can be controlled (or at least influenced) through amended and/or new urban policy?

Attempts to develop comprehensive, multi-agent policies for public art on a citywide level is an attractive, but often incomparable, route. Chicago has become known for its public art. Beginning with its famous Picasso sculpture, and moving on to develop one of the country's first Percent-for-Art programs, the city has carved out a cultural identity for itself that hinges largely on its public art collection. The Department of Cultural Affairs has a dedicated Public Art Program that places explicit emphasis on private sector collaborations and sponsorships. Within the U.S.' current political economy, this is probably the most realistic way forward.

Individuals have played an important role in making Chicago a leading center for public art, much more so historically than New York City.<sup>165</sup> Lois Weisberg, until recently Commissioner of Cultural Affairs since 1989, was an indefatigable champion of public art. In New York, Mayor Bloomberg has played this advocacy role. Is there an alternative to the randomness with which public art has to vie for powerful enough individuals to come along? Is there a way to

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<sup>165</sup> To be fair, New York City has a lot of other kinds of art that compete for attention and funding. As an international hub since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the movers and shakers of New York's art world tend to move in operate in galleries, museums and other private domains.

ensure that the relevance they accord public art isn't lost the minute their post is no longer held?

One change that would alleviate the heavy reliance on "powerhouse" individuals would be to increase the transparency of commissioning processes. Such an improvement would go a long way toward alleviating the frustration on the part of public artists, the public and even the administrators themselves. Public art selection processes are notoriously quiet and opaque. Before anyone knows it, a public art project has gone up in the neighboring square at the behest of a small group of people deciding that it qualifies as in the "best interests of the people." Part of the difficulty lies in the fact that opening up the public consultation process in the now-too-standard way of some sort of public hearing that no one knows about or wants to go to, save the loudest, doesn't normally achieve the desired effect of informed, considered input and dialogue. New measures ought also to be explored that take advantage of advances in technology.

Technological advances mean that new modes of public feedback are available online— internet forums can yield significant numbers

of contributors.<sup>166</sup> Transparency needs to be available to the public. Improved consultation methods need to be sought, and traditional methods need to be consistently employed, the latter of which could include surveys, public meetings, spot interviews and analogous online documentation.

From the outset, transparency also needs to be in place for the artists themselves. One of the biggest hurdles that public art has long faced is its reputation for being bureaucratic and confusing. One of the most positive developments to arise recently has been the establishment of the Public Art Network (PAN). PAN is a national organization under the umbrella of Americans for the Arts; the group collects and lists open calls for public art commissions (its most popular resource),<sup>167</sup> coordinates between artists and administrators, and most of all provides technical assistance for artists and others during public art processes.

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<sup>166</sup> The Times Square Alliance was recently surprised at the outrage prompted by a mural project depicting Latina and Black women in ways that were deemed offensive (the artist, Sofia Maldonado, is herself Latina). Thousands of people participated in online forums debating the issue throughout the summer of 2010.

<sup>167</sup> Interview with Liesel Fenner, Public Art Program Manager, PAN/Americans for the Arts, 11/12/2010.

But PAN is among the very few resources of its kind, and does not engage in the development of commissioning procedures themselves. Beyond the provision of information, artists and commissioners need to be in clear communication about criteria for art proposals, expectations and accountability, and the reasons behind the selection panel makeup itself. If political cronyism is indeed rampant in the selection of public artworks,<sup>168</sup> then articulated development of the panel and project need to be made widely available.

Intentions for the artwork ought to be articulated in writing during the commissioning process; value statements from the commissioners and artists could be compared, and thus misalignment caught early. Also expectations of responsibility could be drafted, of artists to commissioners and vice versa, of the artists and commissioners to the public. The more open, clear and streamlined the process from the beginning, the higher the chance commissioners and artists have to work more effectively as a team.

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<sup>168</sup> Pasternak, "Short-term solutions to a permanent problem."

I believe we must also look to cities like Chicago and Seattle, where public art is given a lot of attention and the high expectations placed upon it are often met, and ask how this can be applied in other cities. Both of these cities are much smaller than New York, but big and successful enough to justify spending on the arts. Perhaps it is in these middle category situations that public art has the best chance for success. It may not be able to rehabilitate Buffalo or dominate in New York, but it is most effective in cities whose ability to experiment with urban policy is higher.

In the bigger and smaller urban areas, I believe that public art may work best within individual agencies and city departments. In the bigger cities like New York, this gives public art the ability to be pervasive yet subtle. It increases the relevance of collaboration between public departments, as well as with the private sector. In smaller cities, it gives public art the chance to exist at all, and to operate on a strategic if not wholesale level.

I am optimistic that New York City has already begun to enact some new ways to reduce art's scattered position within urban policy. The aforementioned Urban Arts Program (DOT), as well as Mierle Laderman Ukeles' unusual but replicable position within the DSNY, are but two

examples of incremental, ongoing occurrences that have wider impact. We need to continue looking for ways to integrate artists into city agencies, as well as seeking artist participation in public planning processes. Seattle's Municipal Arts Plan for example, updated annually, is one way to streamline and evolve a city's public art collection.

Collaborations between artists (and the "art world") and public bodies will continue to be difficult, although I am confident that both sides are becoming increasingly open-minded as examples of interesting public art continue to proliferate on an international level. If the DOT and DSNY are capable of bringing public art to the table, I believe that any New York City agency should be willing to consider how they can also do so. Professional silos are a relic that should be confined to the 20<sup>th</sup> century dustbin. Public art is both the glue and catalyst that cities, and we as citizens, so urgently need.



## ***Concluding Thoughts***

As an urban planner I have sought to ask “what can art uniquely do?” and as someone intimate with the arts I am asking how urban planning can better facilitate good art in public spaces. One of the central aims of this thesis is to encourage urban planners to engage more critically with public art and to strive to understand the genre’s unique potential. Public art has the capacity to engage people (often by hitting an emotional chord), it invites analysis and critical thinking, it creates dialogue, and it encourages all citizens to comment on the use of their shared public spaces. There are few other modes with this kind of potential power.

Since the end of Modernism, public art’s definition has been up for grabs. Its meanings have always been various, but in the last thirty years have splintered to such an extent that speaking of public art as a unitary idea is problematic, if not impossible. Nevertheless, seeking what such a definition may be helpfully forces us to question certain assumptions about the point and meaning of art in the public sphere. As previously mentioned, the agenda of public art producers was originally to “beautify” public spaces and uplift communities.

Public art was also originally introduced as an educational tool, “teaching” the public – with one-way directionality – about the best and highest contemporary art in existence. These intentions still exist in much public art, and are still much more aligned with museums or galleries than endeavors meant to activate and enliven public spaces in the city. In order for public art to engage communities on a broad scale, it needs to pique curiosity and/or wonder, and ideally encourage us to question and interact with the idea of a shared public commons. There is a tension between what the “best art” is, and what the “best public art” is. These ought to no longer be considered the same thing. The “best public art” is currently in the process of an essential period of redefinition. While unable to offer a new definition yet, the time is certainly right to suggest new hybrid forms, processes and intentions for public art in our cities.

The four case studies used in this thesis offer some clues, some more anecdotal and others more resonant on a broad scale. *Tilted Arc* is a very unique case, but the separateness of much public art from most people still exists. Many artists still hesitate to operate in the public sphere; how can we encourage more artists and more members of the public to enter into this dialogue? *Metronome* is a conservative example of public art,

and one that was similarly removed from explicit urban planning processes. Its failure stems at least partly from this remove, and the outdated way that it operates within the built environment.

New York City as context has been one of the most interesting but also the most challenging aspects of this thesis. A highly dense, tightly controlled and thriving metropolis, public art isn't "necessary" in the conventional sense that it has been applied to cities in need of rejuvenation and redevelopment. Instead public art in New York City seems to be qualified as necessary from a marketing standpoint. New York City is known as an international center for the arts, and in order to make that highly visible, public art occupies a unique position. Thus New York City is simultaneously anomalous and exemplary with regards to public art. In spite of its uniqueness, I am confident that research into public art in New York City is nonetheless applicable when considering other cities and environments.

Examples such as *The Gates* and the work of Mierle Laderman Ukeles are the way forward. The former had echoes of the old public art model, but engaged with everyday bureaucratic processes in a way that I believe made it feel more relevant to most urban citizens. It managed to operate

in its own Jean-Claude and Christo autonomous realm, but also brought non-artists into the discussion. While working on this thesis I spoke to many people about my case studies. Although anecdotal "proof," even those who'd I imagine would have been most cynical about *The Gates* expressed delight at their experience visiting them.

That being said, the methodologies that Ukeles employs are what I'd most like to see expanded, replicated and supported in the coming years by urban planners. Ukeles has managed to operate within the contemporary art/museum system, as well as within a city agency, a seemingly unmatched proposition. By doing so she has taken the humble and subtle approach so needed within a large urban bureaucracy, but also managed to effect change from *within*, as opposed to *upon*. The relationship between Ukeles' work and her audience is not didactic or one-way. She is not educating her audience but including them. The work that Ukeles does is more unusual and perplexing than the other three case studies whose trajectories are easier to comprehend.

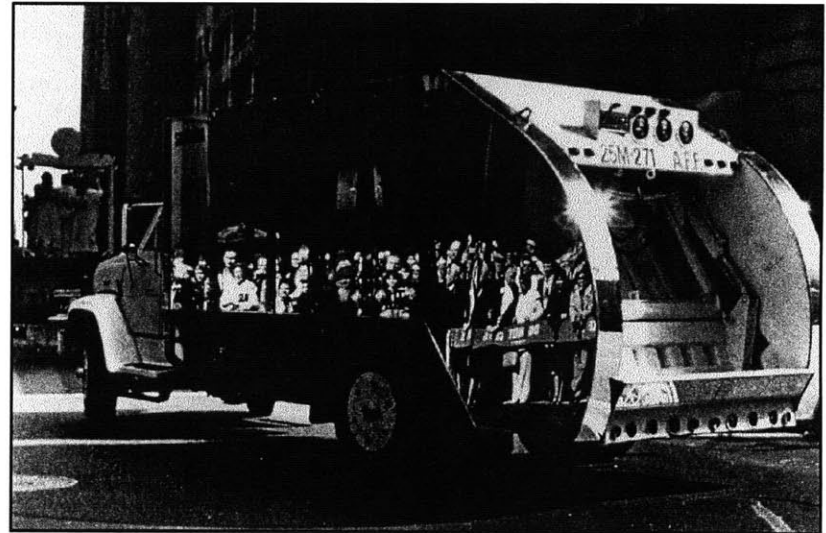
It may be harder to explain the brilliance of her methods for some time. But in conjunction with agencies like Creative Time, and the contemporary art acceptance of ideas like "Relational Art," as well as the

explicit establishment of programs like Urban Arts, I believe that someone like Ukeles is more relevant than ever before. Her work links past, present and future by traversing and reversing the confines of what it means to be an artist, an urban planner, and a citizen.

Public art is becoming more interesting whether it gets codified within urban policy or not. More artists than ever before are finding the public realm to be a complex, challenging and dynamic site with which to engage. The question then becomes whether or not urban planners and policymakers will work to encourage and facilitate this interest, or miss this huge opportunity?

Artists need to be brought into development processes much earlier, and in this intermediary stage, still need ancillary advocates to bridge the gap between their practice, and what is essentially the practice of urban politics. Public art is not inherently justifiable. Until we reach a point where there is a Mierle Laderman Ukeles in every city agency (and ideally in a lot more related realms than that), we'll need to continue relying on individuals to make sure that public art is still meaningful, open and engaging. My immediate hope for the future is that an

increasing number of those individuals are urban planners and policymakers.



**Figure 59: Ukeles' *Social Mirror* (1983). Image *Dispossessed Installations* 1992.**

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