

Susie Kalil

# the art of politics and the politics of art



Lisa Carol Harlowey and Paul Heister, Photographers © 1994

*Cancer . . . There Is Hope*, Victor Salmones's bronze figures at the Richard and Annette Bloch Cancer Survivor's Plaza, 1993. Prominently located on Hermann Drive between Main and Fannin streets south of the Museum of Fine Arts, this privately donated commemorative plaza raises questions about who determines the selection and placement of public art in Houston.

Public art begins in the democratic urge to bring art to a broad, unspecialized public.

There is no consensus today about what public art should look like, or certainty about what a monument is. Public art has served concurrently as landmark, symbol, monument, functional element, architectural embellishment, isolated aesthetic object, and cultural artifact. A century ago, public sculpture glorified the ideals or triumphs of an entire community by presenting familiar figures or symbols; alternatively, it glorified the person or group who paid for it. But public art isn't just a hero on a horse anymore. Bronze memorials gave way to the large-scale abstract sculpture that flooded the public domain when the National Endowment for the Arts launched its Art in Public Places program in the 1960s. Then the explosion of new forms in the 1980s – street art, video, billboards, protest actions, environments, graffiti, murals – radically changed the face of contemporary public art. Economists, historians, and urban sociol-

ogists have discussed the meaning and political uses of public spaces, the impoverishment of public life, and the possibilities for its rehabilitation and revitalization through art, architecture, and more creative city planning. But despite a general trend toward involving artists in the process of designing buildings and public areas, public art is often applied like Band-Aids to predetermined sites, as after-the-fact attempts to remedy poor planning or as extraneous baubles, monuments to good intentions.

The public must be puzzled by these efforts. It struggles to understand, or ignores, and can end up destroying the work. To succeed, public art has to transcend the laws that offer it a rightful place in the built environment as well as specific issues that legitimate it. It must invest itself with the collective understanding of the place and recognize the ideals of its audience. In our fragmented contempo-

rary society, rarely does any one work or program accomplish this almost impossible task.

What makes public art public? There is a difference between art that is intrinsically public (art produced with partial or total public funding) and art that is public essentially because of its location (privately financed projects placed in publicly accessible areas). Public art in the first sense implies that the work must have a significance that is commonly recognized and respected.<sup>1</sup> As one critic points out, "Recognizability means that style and subject matter can't be obscure or personal."<sup>2</sup> Privately owned sculpture and paintings found outside museums and galleries in places accessible to the public do not necessarily constitute public art, as is illustrated by the sale and removal of *America*, the majestic, 46-foot-long mural by the late Rufino Tamayo that hung in the lobby of the Bank of the

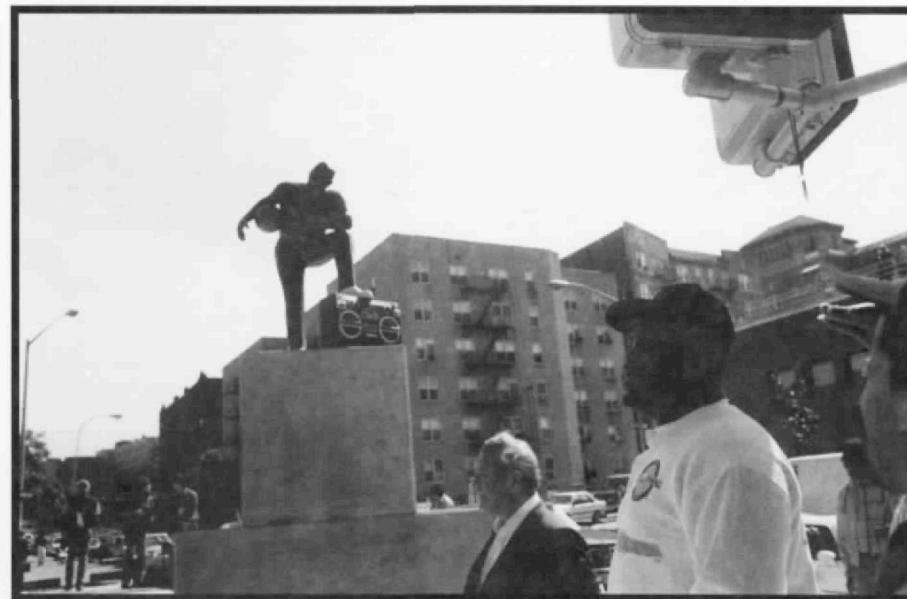
Southwest for nearly 40 years.<sup>3</sup> "Art in public places" may be a more appropriate designation for works belonging to museums, universities, or corporations.<sup>4</sup>

What role should the public play in public art? The issue has become more urgent as works of contemporary artists appear with increasing frequency in corporate plazas and city parks. Perhaps public sculpture's problem lies in its very publicness. It inherits the difficulties implicit in its funding label, "art in public places," raising the disturbing yet necessary question of whether "art" and "public art" are not very different things.<sup>5</sup> If public sculpture is subject to the definition implicit in its name – if it is designed to be seen outside the cordoned-off viewing area that the exhibition system provides – then it enters a sphere that is unfocused, unspecialized, and unmediated by traditional aesthetic norms. It engages an audience that is broad and heterogeneous. And it enters an environment that removes art from its privileged status to an ancillary one, involving new roles within a wider realm of entertainment, politics, and economics. All of these, of course, are consequences of the desire to make public art useful or usable by a new and larger audience.

Public art begins in the democratic urge to bring art to a broad, unspecialized public. To this ethical vision of art's transforming social power – its capacity to alter the communal mind – has been added a corresponding vision of its economic function. Therefore site can be interpreted in many different ways, from spatial to social to financial.<sup>6</sup> Increasingly, public art must be held accountable both to political and eco-

A similar controversy erupted in Washington, D.C., over the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, designed by Maya Ling Lin. After significant negative response from some public figures and veterans' groups who called the piece unpatriotic, a compromise was reached with the placement nearby of two "heroizing" statues, Frederick Hart's battle-weary male soldiers dressed in fatigues and Glenna Goodacre's Vietnam Women's Memorial.

But as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial proves, education of the community must be an integral part of any plan to bring art to civic places. Almost 13 years after it was erected, this gravely beautiful work of art ranks as the single greatest



John Ahearn and Rigoberto Torres, *South Bronx Sculpture Park*, 1991, detail. In the wake of strong community objections to the implied characterization of neighborhood residents, the lifelike cast figures were removed shortly after their installation.

monument built in our time. With its seemingly unending scroll, a powerful ritual of naming is enacted, individual experiences occur, and collective meaning is generated. The controversy that surrounded its creation arose from an awareness that such generation of meaning would take place and might have political implications. Perhaps the first mandate for attributing meaning to a work of public art is to recognize that meaning-making is a shared activity between artist and observer.<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, can one go too far in the direction of consensus and community? Take the recent controversy over John Ahearn's *South Bronx Sculpture Park*. In the wake of community objections, the figural sculptures, painted casts of neighborhood residents by Ahearn and his partner, Rigoberto Torres, were removed just a few days after they were installed. Community members believed that the subjects for the lifelike cast figures negatively represented their neighborhood. Ahearn's willingness to listen to the community is commendable, but the removal of the work raised distressing questions. If we reduce public art to the role of promoting community self-esteem, have we

come that far from the false consensus implied by the traditional war memorial or public statue? Moreover, the tendency to romanticize community may prevent some artists from acknowledging the tensions and conflicts that exist in any group. The Ahearn case highlights all the crushing issues for public artists: Should pleasing the local neighborhood be the artist's primary goal? Should works necessarily be decorative? Should artists be encouraged to provoke debate on relevant issues? We feel torn by the ease with which one can undermine anything that is unorthodox and experimental. But if public art is one of the most active areas of artistic "research and development," it is because the average pedestrian has become passionate about what goes up

ence, context, and meaning. The problem is that the dialogue surrounding public art in Houston has been too closely circumscribed. By asking more far-ranging questions, we can consider not only public art but perhaps the very nature of art in our contemporary situation. And this goes beyond discussion about the merits of abstract versus representational art, "plop" art versus collaborative action, or whether public money should be spent on works that may offend public taste. Something more fundamental is at issue: the very identity of Houston. Four recent examples plainly illustrate the problems surrounding public art in the city.

Last year, controversy erupted over Moody Park's *Vaquero*, designed by prominent Mexican-American artist Luis Jiménez. The gun-toting statue is an exuberant homage to the Mexican cattlemen and horsemen of two centuries past. Installed in 1981, three years after the Moody Park riot, the vividly painted fiberglass sculpture of a Mexican cowboy riding a bucking blue horse with red eyes has always had its detractors and its defenders. It became the focus of new public attention when some area residents, thinking that the sculpture depicts a drunken Mexican, collected hundreds of signatures and petitioned the city to remove it from the park. These groups perceive the statue as a poor representation of Hispanic heritage and as a symbol of violence in a violence-plagued area. They believe the sculpture was commissioned by the city in an attempt to appease the riot-torn neighborhood. However, just as many residents view the *Vaquero* with pride and respect, as a valuable enhancement of the community. Not only is the Houston *Vaquero* the artist's first public sculpture; it is the first in an edition of six, another one of which was acquired by the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American Art in Washington. Jiménez typically uses images and techniques drawn from popular culture, particularly Mexican-American culture and Mexican myth. Based on traditional monuments of historical figures on horseback, the statue powerfully conveys the spirit of the vaquero in the taming of the West, but at the same time raises the problem of how such a work is perceived in the changing life of a community.

A more difficult area to grapple with critically is that of accountability and ethics. In the past few years, some of the

economic forces and to society's concerns. Even so, private and public demands tend to coexist uneasily within the sphere of civic art. For "public" is not a passive, fixed idea: it has to be continually invented and constructed. Public life assumes many forms, and the advice of experts is no guarantee that more than cluttered mediocrity will result from the combination of development dollars and aesthetic pretensions. Public dialogue on the subject has been stuck on one question for years: Do we put cerebral, hard-to-understand works in public places for the educational experience they can offer, or do we opt for the middle ground — works essentially aspiring to the condition of Muzak? In general, the successful public art projects have been those in which the community was fully involved in the selection process, and they were deemed successful because they generated no controversy. From a developer's or institution's viewpoint this may be the bottom line, but for an artist it can be disastrous.

Writing in *Art in Public Places* (1981), John Beardsley argued that "because the forms of art have evolved and diversified so dramatically in the last several decades, there is a disparity between contemporary artistic practice and public expectations of what art should look like."<sup>7</sup> Often the "disparity" can be smoothed over by a mixture of careful preparation and community participation, sensitivity to attaining the best possible work for the appropriate site, and a civic consensus that paying for and supporting such art is the right thing to do. Do artists have a responsibility to their audience as well as to their art? Sculptor Richard Serra was faulted when his *Tilted Arc* (1981), commissioned by the General Services Administration for Foley Square in New York City, was greeted with such hostility by those who had to look at it and walk around it that after a lengthy process of petitioning and public hearings it was removed in 1989. Along with several tons of Cor-Ten steel, a whole battery of assumptions about public art was tossed into the dustbin: who makes it, why it gets made, who it is for. Before *Tilted Arc*, Serra commented that "after the piece is built, the space will be understood primarily as a function of the sculpture."<sup>8</sup> Since that debacle, however, the discussion has shifted away from the notion of site specificity as a response to the formal dynamics of the site toward a concern for community as context.

on his or her block or in his or her mall. According to critic Lucy Lippard, a progressive artist's job is

*to produce an image that expands the public's expectations of what they may get from public forms, to provoke thought, and help people look around them with fresh eyes. The more permanent public art must offer an experience that is intimate, complex, and enduring, as well as decorative and acceptable to its sponsors.*<sup>10</sup>

The relationship between art and environment, art and context, artist and audience remains at the heart of any public art worth its turf. But the great and still elusive questions surrounding public art are, Which public? Is there an exchange between art and audience? Does art in the public interest really interest the public?

These are just a few of the knotty questions that public art raises in Houston. The questions concern not only aesthetics, but also the fine line dividing exploitation and collaboration in the relationship between artists and their communities. It takes more than an outdoor site to make sculpture public. To consider the public nature of art is to undertake an analysis of artmaking that highlights issues of audi-

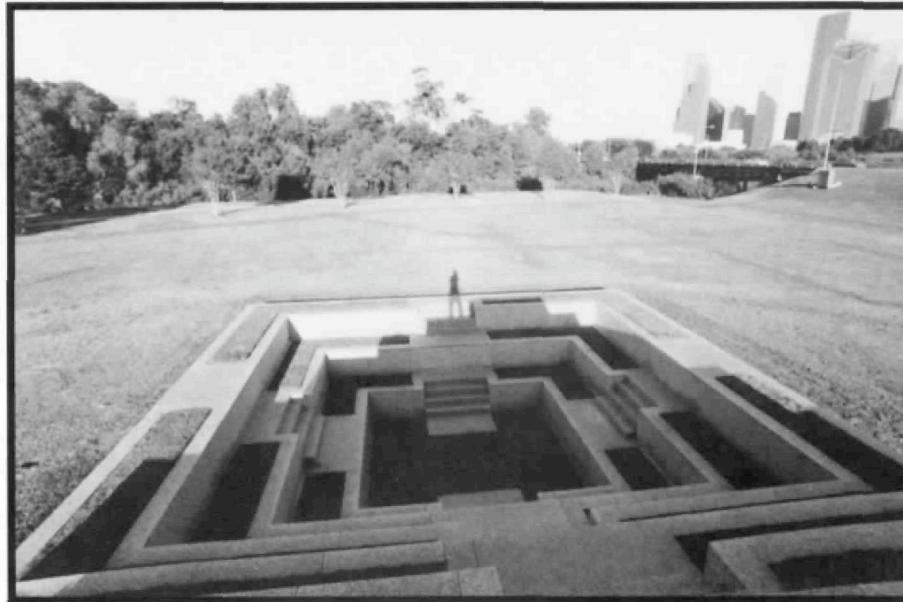


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**Luis Jiménez, *Vaquero*, 1980, Moody Park, Houston.** Members of the Hispanic community have recently objected to the imagery of this molded fiberglass sculpture, going so far as to suggest its removal from the park.

city's most visible sites have been given over to permanent works that aspire unsuccessfully to lofty ideals of collective experience and the common good. Dedicated in 1992 after seven years of planning and the investment of \$1.2 million in private funds, the Houston Police Officers Memorial, a forbidding pyramidal granite monument on the banks of Buffalo Bayou beside Memorial Drive near downtown, is neither the family playscape nor the serenely meditative site that sculptor Jesús Bautista Moroles envisioned. This memorial to police officers who lost their lives in the line of duty, one of the largest contemporary public sculptures in the country, consists of five stepped pyramids, each 40 feet square at the base. Each has steps of Texas granite and terraces of grass. A central ziggurat rising 12½ feet from ground to apex culminates in a slab of carved granite bearing the names of the officers. Four inverted pyramids seemingly plunge into the earth, creating modest amphitheaters around the central structure. Accessible only from a small parking lot beside the westbound lanes of Memorial Drive and guarded 24 hours a day by Houston police officers, the isolated site neither welcomes people nor serves as a retreat for spiritual renewal. Moroles intended to create a place where children and parents would want to spend time – an interactive monument, perhaps, that would work as seamlessly with the landscape as Maya Lin's Vietnam Memorial does. But the result is an example of public art that has not met the planned criteria of site and context. A major thoroughfare linking Houston's residential and downtown areas, Memorial Drive is more conducive to "drive-by" than interactive sculpture. Neither the site nor the massive work are friendly to the viewer. After parking their cars, people must first pass through a small plaza featuring benches carved with donors' names, a police bunker, and a

blue portable toilet before setting out on the walkway to the tomblike monument. The sculpture itself is ominous, perhaps dangerous. Its grassy levels and stairs must be climbed on circuitous routes. The pathways are narrow and uneven, and the sharp edges are too precipitous for adults, much less small children. Even worse, the view of downtown and adjacent Allen Parkway from the top of the pyramid is unrewarding and reveals few perspectives of the landscape other than those already drawn from the street. Significantly, the four below-grade plazas are too small to function as individual amphitheaters.



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**Jesús Bautista Moroles, *Houston Police Officers Memorial*, 1992, located off Memorial Drive outside downtown.**

On an even more prominent site, the Richard and Annette Bloch Cancer Survivor's Plaza should set off a red alert in the design community. He is the "R" of H & R Block, headquartered in Kansas City, and was so grateful for surviving lung cancer that he decided to build Cancer Survivor's Plazas in the 52 largest cities in the U.S. and Canada. In Houston, with the support of Peter Marzio, director of the Museum of Fine Arts, Bloch chose a nice little triangle of grass and trees at the northern edge of Hermann Park, between Fannin Street, Hermann Drive, and Main Street. Adjacent to the Museum of Fine Arts and the Warwick Hotel, the piece was intended to bring together park visitors and cancer survivors alike. The overall design works well as a contemplative pedestrian plaza, with a low circular wall and benches on the inside. A three-columned fountain that the Women's City Club gave Houston in 1944 is still in situ, but it is overpowered by a flowery sculptured tempietto – a mishmash of garish architectural styles and decorative elements, including brand new classical columns, lacy ironwork, and an abundance of sources of nighttime illumination. Bits of advice about cancer are cast in bronze and attached to posts. Worse, a computer encased like a shrine (or funer-



Lisa Carol Hardaway and Paul Hester, Photographers © 1994

**Joe Incrapera, *Christopher Columbus*, 1992, donated to the city of Houston by the Federation of Italian American Organizations of Greater Houston and installed in Bell Park on Montrose Boulevard over the objections of the Municipal Art Commission, whose decision was successfully appealed to city council.**

to Columbus that looks like it was made two or three centuries ago is an illustration, not a work of art.

For years there have been safety nets, checkpoints, and committees intended to ensure that we, the public, receive great works of art from donors. Like most major cities, however, Houston has some intelligent and adventurous works, such as Claes Oldenburg's *Geometric Mouse X* and Jean Dubuffet's *Monument au Fantôme*, but also its share of public art that can be described as innocuous at best. Unlike that of most major cities, almost all of Houston's public art has come from private sources. There is no municipal budget for art acquisition. Some works have been donated by the artists who created them; other pieces have been commissioned by corporations or foundations, accepted by the city council on the advice of the Municipal Art Commission, and installed at the donor's expense. Corporate and philanthropic largesse, which brought Houston some major pieces of blue-chip public art in the central business and museum districts, proved that Houstonians can accomplish great things, but the private initiatives and programs scattered throughout the city also hindered the development of any public plan. Significantly, 190 cities in the U.S. have a public art program, but Houston does not.

ary box) offers cancer information. Tipping the scale far past bad taste is Victor Salmones's bronze rendition of a family gamboling through bronze rectangles, looking happy to have made it out alive. The \$1 million maintenance endowment that Bloch paid to secure this prime real estate smack in the middle of one of Houston's most heavily trafficked intersections was a bargain. What Houston received in return is an insulting interpretation of a terrible disease.

After a successful appeal to city council to overturn the ruling of the Municipal Art Commission, the intimate garden areas of Montrose's Bell Park were compromised by a schmaltzy bronze statue of Christopher Columbus by Galveston artist Joe Incrapera. The Federation of Italian-American Organizations of Greater Houston donated the piece to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the explorer's voyage to America. Columbus holds a nautical map in one hand and points due west with the other, either symbolically aiming toward uncharted lands or merely gesturing at the Italian Community Cultural Center across the street. A monument to Columbus may be appropriate in the right context, perhaps in the federation's front yard. But a public monument

What the city has is pieces of a process. The Municipal Art Commission (MAC) consists of a group of citizens, appointed by the mayor, that serves as Houston's conduit for receiving gifts of artwork to be displayed in the city. More importantly, it is charged with the authority to approve any work of art to be placed on public property. MAC also solicits funds for the purchase of art, promotes beautification of public spaces through displays of art, and advocates further development of the arts in Houston. Unfortunately, MAC's authority can be too easily challenged, because its decisions are only recommendations that must be approved by city council. Another agency concerned with public art is the Cultural Arts Council of Houston/Harris County

(CACHH), an independent, nonprofit arts group that contracts with the city of Houston to provide services and disburse city funds to the local arts community. More specialized programs include the SPARK ("school park") program, which enables artists, landscape architects, and neighborhood residents to create parks on HISD school playgrounds. SPARK is sponsored by HISD and funded by the city of Houston, individual schools, and neighborhood organizations and businesses. Multicultural Education and Counseling through the Arts (MECA) assists the artistic development of low-income families, mainly in the Sixth Ward, by sponsoring student murals in HISD buildings.

What Houston has lacked over the years is the implementation of some shared vision. With the recent publication of a cultural arts plan from the Houston/Harris County Arts Task Force, there is promise that the future will be better. Among other things, the task force recommended that by 1996, a full 1.75 percent of the money for city and county capital improvement projects be allocated to art. Most of the proposals will be the responsibility of Jessica Cusick, the newly appointed director of CACHH's public art program. Before her position with CACHH, Cusick was director of the public art project of Los Angeles's Metropolitan Transit Authority. In Houston, her goal is to develop and coordinate guidelines, processes, and methodologies for a public art plan.

Can we have a public art program here? Or does public art benefit and serve only a few people? After all, Houston is a car-centered city with sprawling suburbs. Multilayered, pluralistic, and roughshod, it has an electrifying spirit, but for a city its size, Houston has an amazing lack of convivial places where people congregate by choice – not schools, malls, or community centers, but the in-between spaces for the public's enjoyment, such as squares, fountains, and promenades. Unlike other cities with successful public art programs, such as Seattle, Phoenix, Philadelphia, or Chicago, Houston has neither a remarkable landscape nor the amenities that residents of older cities view as their birthright. In what circumstances will people appreciate public art and consider it part of their city's identity? Who is the audience for public art in Houston, and what is public art's significance in Houston at the end of the century? Depending on one's point of view, such questions may conjure up the image of the public realm as a kind of experimental laboratory, even a labyrinth. The survey of selected Houston cultural leaders, artists, and professionals that follows indicates the conflicting ideas that arise regarding public art.



**Project Row Houses, 1994, at 2500 Holman in the Third Ward. This community-based project brings together neighborhood revitalization, preservation, and public art. Eight of the ten restored 1930s shotgun frame houses will have revolving art installations by regionally and nationally selected artists.**

Lisa Carol Hardaway and Paul Hester, Photographers © 1994

## Viewpoints

**Peter Marzio, director, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; chair, Public Art and Urban Design Committee, Houston/Harris County Arts Task Force.**

I don't believe there's been a lot of thinking here about public art. What we tried to do in the task force report was to get away from the narrow, elitist concept of just a few sculptures standing around and deal instead with everything from thinking of the bayou as the spine of the city to thinking of landscape design and making additions to the landscape that enhance the individual's interaction with it, like the walking and running paths along the bayous, so that you see the whole city as a big interactive sculpture. The fact that this was the first report of its kind is significant. Even if only five percent of its proposals are accomplished in twenty years, the next committee will have our report as a base to work from.

It seems to me that a lot of the neighborhood-based work is most important. I include sidewalks, curb design, and signage, so that public art is the boundary of the private sector. It makes life nicer, enhances the value of the land, and instills pride.

The Project Row Houses is something that I would call a significant public art project. Oftentimes historic preservation can create neighborhood pride. Obviously I'm not against the great sculptures, but at times we've asked a sculpture to do too

much. I've often heard criticism of the Henry Moore piece on Allen Parkway. I run by the Moore every day, and I think it's a handsome sculpture. But because there's not a lot of that kind of work in Houston, you tend to get a group that's very critical. I find their criticism extremely destructive. What we need is tolerance toward different approaches to public art and getting the neighborhoods involved. That way, the people who are going to be looking at the work and involved with the environment every day will have had some say in what it is.

What I like about the Cancer Survivor's Plaza is that it is endowed for maintenance. I saw that as a precedent for any kind of public art here. There's no sense in having public art that's going to deteriorate and the city isn't going to keep up. I think the Cancer Survivor's sculpture itself is kind of corny, but truthfully, I'm not violently against it. I'll bet if you polled the people of Houston, that piece would not come out as one of the more unpopular sculptures in town.

I also supported the Christopher Columbus statue in Bell Park, and there was a big hubbub about that. I don't see what's wrong with it. There's a lot of mediocre sculpture in Rome, for example. But somehow it gives life, a sense of activity. It reflects the variety that makes up the society. I'm not defending bad art; I'm just saying there's got to be some toler-

ance. It's the layers of the city, to be able to peel away and see what was important at different times. We can have that in Houston.

**Paul Winkler, director, Menil Collection.**

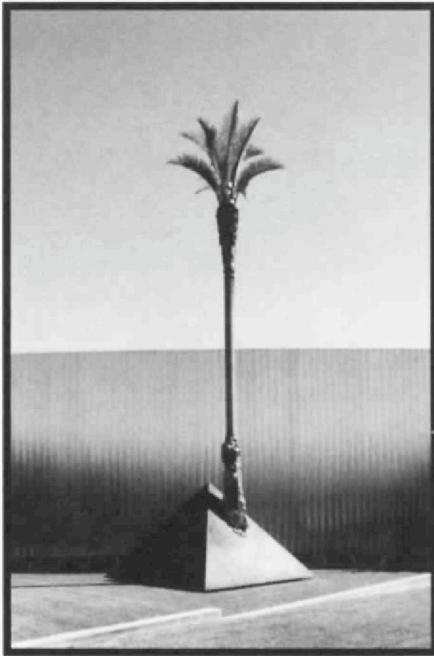
The whole idea of sculpture and how it plays a role is very interesting. If you think of Rome and its marvelous piazzas, everything is geared toward walking. Then you come to cities at the end of the 20th century that are geared toward the automobile, and yet we try to do something in a traditional manner called public sculpture.

In a city like Houston, where it can rain nearly 60 inches a year, we have an abundance of water, and yet we don't use water at all, basically. I can think of just two or three fountains. A fountain is a beautiful thing, because it can work as a point of organization for a city or a street scenario. It works from the car, it works for pedestrians, it works from every point of view. And yet we tend to not even think about fountains.

To come up with a plan of boulevards and fountains takes a real vision of the city, with the community behind it. How much should be sculpture and how much should be city planning and architecture? Sculpture is a very specific thing, and sometimes we want to use it for the wrong reasons.

We are about to take down one of the most interesting forms in Houston, the Blue Ribbon Rice elevators. You'll never be able to build a sculpture of that scale, one that represents the last piece of the city's agrarian history in the memory of its citizens. Do those things count for anything? I think a lot more needs to be done first in urban planning – how we get around, how we spend our time, where we go to spend our time – before we can have any really wonderful plan for art.

What are the public spaces in Houston that are really used and where people come together? Hermann Park, the jogging track at Memorial Park, the Transco water wall. Those are our public spaces. The greatest public space for years has been Miller Theater, yet we haven't taken care of it, and we failed to make it visually stimulating. What people have to realize is that there are sites that have a priority to the overall city. The notion of "site specific" is an extremely difficult and delicate thing and means something far beyond what we've seen so far in this city. It's very hard to put an object anywhere. There are only a certain number of important sites, and great care has to be taken in what's done with them. We're at a point in our growth when we can take a little time and really look at some things. We are going to survive. We are going to be a city. How do we want to look? What do we want to be?



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Mel Chin, *Manila Palm*, 1978. Located behind the Contemporary Arts Museum.

**Marti Mayo, director, Contemporary Arts Museum; former director, Blaffer Gallery, University of Houston.**

Houston is such a new city that, unlike New York or Washington, D.C., cities that really came into their own in the 19th century, there's no tradition of public art here. Washington is full of 19th-century sculptures of generals on their horses, and we know what that kind of art symbolizes. In Houston, we don't have much older public art, so everyone thinks we need some. What I think the public in Houston doesn't always realize is that those generals were commissioned and sited at a time when realist sculpture was the prevailing aesthetic.

The best art, the art that survives in the public mind over time, is the best art of its time. Today, we need to focus on work that represents the best artists working now, and a breakdown occurs here because contemporary art is so distant from the public's eye and understanding. Nonetheless, we need to make serious efforts to educate the general public so that it sees art as a necessary and important part of everyday life. And to do this, we need great works that are permanent and that can become part of the visual fabric of the city. I'm not sure I want a program that consists only of temporary, socially aware installations. We need variety and experimentation of all kinds. There's a lot of good work and a lot of trash done in all styles. And we need to realize that public art is going to be uneven, depending on the broad constituencies involved in choosing it.

I think one of the most successful pieces of public art in Houston in terms of function and performance is Mel Chin's *Manila Palm*, behind the Contemporary Arts Museum. It has turned out to be a kind of logo for the building and is visually a part of what we think about the CAM. The Museum of Fine Arts sculpture garden is entering the visual fabric of the city in a way I did not anticipate ten years ago. The garden is a tribute to the MFA, because it is so well used. People are truly

at home there among the art works. The public art at the University of Houston is also a great success story. To have any sculpture at all in a public agency is a miracle: the fact that UH and its board of regents have been consistently supportive of such a program is a measure of commitment to excellence that you find nowhere else in this state. Of course, not each and every piece out of fifty on the UH campus is absolutely brilliant, but as work that people can relate to, I think the art on the campus is very successful.

In the end, we need to remember that Houston is not a pedestrian city. Public art here has to be something you can see and understand as you drive past it. Or it has to be in a situation, as at UH, where people commonly walk around as they go about their daily lives.

They understand that a segment of the population doesn't want public money spent on anything having to do with the Confederacy. Sam Houston needs a tremendous amount of work. We'll have to go through fundraising and an adopt-a-monument program. But we've got to start taking care of what we have before we start adding other works. I think MAC has always been reactive rather than proactive.

something of quality that would better serve them in the long run.

I think MAC has a place. It's not really a culprit, but it has been an easy mark for people. It has said no to the endless gifts that people want to give to the city. MAC is valuable because without its input, city council decides. MAC was started in the sixties, by the way, because city council was rejecting really good works of art. As long as they keep artists on the MAC board – and there are terrific people on the commission now – it can continue to function quite well, have a variety of inputs, and keep the aesthetic level high.

**Marion McCollam, executive director, Cultural Arts Council of Houston/Harris County.**

CACHH is a catalyst, nurturer, and cultural planner for the city and county. Local arts agencies like CACHH have had to step up to a larger community responsibility in recent years. The agencies that connect with a lot of different resources are the ones succeeding. CACHH is the designated arts agency of the city and the county and is responsible for supporting the arts and developing partnerships that leverage new resources. We are connecting with the city and other public entities in numerous ways. To justify money for the arts when there are such issues as education, youth at risk, and homelessness, it is necessary to establish the crucial relevance of the arts to city life. In a changing society, where few values are generally agreed upon, issues of diversity and community are especially visible in tangible public art projects. We see ourselves as a lightning rod of sorts. Part of our agenda has to do with the visual character of the city: public art, urban design, and historical preservation. The various studies, whether Main Street or Buffalo Bayou, are pieces of a puzzle. Public art as part of the city-building process could begin to bring some linkages.

Some of the things that excite me about Houston are also some of the things that delay certain types of activity. The very individualistic approach to things does not always lend itself to looking beyond a particular building that may be magnificent in itself. Take some of the structures downtown: they hit the sidewalk and that's it. There may be a beautiful piece of art in the plaza, but there's no sense of planning beyond the individual project. How will that plaza be used? How does it relate to the streetscape? The idea of doing comprehensive planning is new here. It means looking at things more broadly, looking at their impact. This is a critical time for Houston, and everyone senses that. I knew what a key position a public art director would play in our future. We needed someone who could work with the disparate interests and involve the community. The mayor is saying "Imagine Houston," and public art must be part of that vision.



Rick Gardiner

Matt Mullican, *untitled sculpture*, 1991, at the Houston Science Center Building, University of Houston. Since 1966, the University of Houston has set aside one percent of the construction budget of all new or renovated buildings for art acquisition. The city of Houston is considering a similar program.

**Artie Lee Hinds, chair, Municipal Art Commission.**

Our mandate is to review, screen, approve, or disapprove anything going on city-owned property. Then we send our recommendation to the city council. They're the ones who make the final decision. We don't always have the full authority we're supposed to have. We have to get in there and educate new department heads whenever the administration changes. I am the member of longest standing – a total of 22 years.

One of the problems we're up against now is maintenance. When people want to donate works, they need to give an endowment for maintenance. Some cities reserve 10 percent of the overall cost of a work for a maintenance fund. Maybe some bronzes need washing down every three to five years. But what do you do when a sculpture gets graffitied? The parks department doesn't have any budget for restoration. I'm trying to get a proper restoration program into effect. We're going to be spending money very shortly on three major historical monuments – Dick Dowling, Sam Houston, and the *Spirit of the Confederacy*. The Daughters and Sons of the Confederacy are raising money for matching funds.

**Gael Stack, artist; professor of painting, director of the art graduate program, University of Houston; former six-year Municipal Art Commission member.**

What MAC does is make recommendations to the city council, and they're generally gone along with, although not always. MAC has a separate function. It says yes or no to things going on city property. It doesn't commission art, it doesn't buy art, it doesn't have a budget. It isn't a public art program. If somebody in the city – like the mayor or city council – really wants something, then the city gets it. The city council can override MAC. A case in point is the Columbus statue in Bell Park. MAC voted against it; an issue was made of the work because it's figurative.

What happens is that some people tend to see contemporary art, particularly abstract art, as elitist. In favoring figurative work, such individuals don't make visual distinctions, even when a figurative work isn't successful. In their view, if you oppose a particular figurative piece, then you are against figurative sculpture. But that's not the real issue, of course. You run into problems because there are people with things very dear to their hearts, and MAC tries to steer them toward

**Jessica Cusick, director of public art, Cultural Arts Council of Houston/Harris County.**

I can't stress enough the necessity for dialogue and process. I think that people have a right to question what they're going to bump into every day on the way to work or taking their children to play. That's why public art isn't right for all artists, not right for all sites, not all things to all people.

A public art administrator and a public art plan have to put together situations that foster dialogue and interchange. But it's also important to have sites and locations where there's long-term thinking, a point where government needs to step in and take civic responsibility. There need to be times when we commission great monuments that may not be loved now but will be in forty years' time. It's the issue of acknowledging the plurality of our society.

On one level, public art is a great way to decorate, but that's the least of the things it can do. It's one more way of rethinking our society, which we desperately need to do. If our cities are going to be successful places where we want to live, then we need to rethink how we live in them, design them, maintain them, and interact in them. Public art is a part of that understanding.

Houston is not like other cities, which is the first thing you have to acknowledge when thinking of a public art program. At this point we don't have a program to implement. What we have is a voluntary resolution on the part of city council. But we are going to need to draft guidelines and develop a process for implementing projects.

Somebody asked me once what was the best thing I could guarantee in terms of a public art program. I said I can't guarantee that everybody is going to like it, or that it will make everybody happy. I can guarantee an accountable process, and I think that's the most important thing. The most obvious way to connect the public and art is to put together a real public process. There are workshops I want to do with artists, input I want to get from the arts, planning, and design communities. Out of all this will come a public art plan, one that establishes a framework for public art and urban design in Houston.

But public art planning is like any other process: you need to set up opportunities for dialogue and review. It's not going to happen overnight. It gets back to the question, Is public art of any interest to the public? You create a program that's flexible, accessible, that's doing different types of things in different areas. You do it with a public art program that makes room for projects that are totally community generated and community oriented, and projects that are about the best artists of our generation creating new focal points for our city. You don't want a program that's biased one way or another. You want a full spectrum that creates possibilities, both structurally and in terms of funding.

**Barry Moore, architect and *Houston Life* contributing editor.**

Who is the audience for public art? I guess that depends on where it is. The audience for public art in the Galleria is high school kids with cars who get out at the Transco water wall.

Houston is not a public art kind of town. It's not an environmental kind of town. I think there's a knowledgeable, verbal, tasteful audience for public art, but it's not a very wide one. Chicago is one of the most wonderful places in the world because it has an incredible audience for architecture. Cab drivers have opinions. They discuss it and get in heated arguments. But in Houston there's a lack of public awareness. Chicago has an atmosphere that says your opinion is



**Jim Love, *The Portable Trojan Bear*, 1974, Hermann Park.**

valuable whether you're a homeless person or a CEO. That's what public art is – it's something that people have opinions about.

Probably one of the best pieces of public art in Houston is Jim Love's *Portable Trojan Bear* in Hermann Park. It's for everybody, and kids love to climb on it. The bear is an example of public art that all kinds of people relate to quickly and positively. It's also in a place where lots of people can enjoy being around it.

But Houston doesn't have a central place or a central boulevard. We're really good at designing buildings but terrible at designing the places they go in. Since we don't have public spaces, we don't have a very well formed idea of public art. We don't even have a public discourse. One of the reasons zoning was going to be a challenge and potentially a real problem is that Houstonians have never learned to have a public forum for discussion and debate. You can't have a city with a spirit of public art like Seattle, Chicago, or New York unless you've got a community that really knows what being citizens in a city entails. We're just a big town. It's the most interesting town in the world. This is like São Paulo North. You never know what you're going to run into.

**Paul Kittelson, artist; assistant professor and interim coordinator of sculpture, University of Houston.**

Public art works on so many different levels. More and more artists are seeing it in terms of public dialogue or raising issues that incorporate the community and people's interests. The key is the temporality of more current work, the fact that it's only there for a short period of time. It changes and creates a more active dialogue with the people around it than the piece of "plop" art that's there forever, which people come to know and ignore.

We have the seeds of a really dynamic public art program here, if we could just support and coordinate some of the efforts going on. Rick Lowe's Project

group of people can appreciate. In Houston, you'll see more and more projects going on. But unless artists start to turn in a new direction, we're going to end up with bronze cowboys.

**Rick Lowe, artist; founder, Project Row Houses; Municipal Art Commission member.**

There are some things that a lot of artists don't like to deal with. But when you throw the public into it, you have to deal with the issue of relevance. Is a work relevant to a group of people? When you start dealing with public art, you have to take that into consideration. The Project Row Houses will be very easy to get ordinary people involved in and create dialogue. The physical houses have relevance to people in the area, those who grew up in the houses or lived near them. Getting the local people involved will increase public awareness of the project as public art and will definitely increase its lifespan. I hope each time artists come in to do projects they can address different concerns about the houses, and years down the line we can regenerate those questions people have dealt with. These are spaces that have a lot of historical significance, and the challenge is for the artist to use that as a basis for creation.

We tend to think of art as an inside-the-Loop thing. But if we want to broaden support, broaden the awareness of art, we have to realize that most of the Houston population lives out in the suburbs. I would like to see temporary, or in some cases permanent, works of public art in different neighborhoods around the city. The freeways are prime public space. We stand to gain a lot by strengthening our focus on those areas rather than continuing to build monuments to corporate buildings. ■

Row Houses is an interesting, up-to-date approach to public art. Or the Buffalo Bayou Art Park: its intention is to provide a training ground for artists to give them exposure in putting things out in public, dealing with the outdoors, with vandalism and weather. It also establishes a dialogue between MAC and the parks department.

How do you measure successful public art? You look at supposedly great works of public art and nobody wants to touch them – they're not people friendly. I think the most successful piece of public art here is the water wall at the Transco Tower. People come to it, engage it. The tower itself is a sort of landmark that could almost be considered public art. But education is the major thrust. Places like Seattle have computer monitors that help explain public art. The city puts out the money to really educate people. They aren't going to appreciate art just because they're exposed to it. They need help to understand that art is about engagement and dialogue, and not simply a matter of whether it's good or bad.

You can't make public art for everybody; people are just too different. The art audience needs to get larger. Public art can't be something that only a very small

1 Rosen, Nancy, "Public Art: City Amblings," in *Ten Years of Public Art, 1972-1982*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Doris C. Freedman Gallery, 1982), p. 11.

2 Goldin, Amy, "The Esthetic Ghetto: Some Thoughts About Public Art," *Art in America*, May-June 1974, p. 31.

3 A series of bankruptcies in the 1980s placed ownership of *America* in question, with MCorp, Aetna Realty, and Bank One engaged in litigation. In 1992 the work was sold at auction for \$2.6 million.

4 For a detailed overview and comprehensive treatment of art in public spaces in Houston, see William Howze, "Why a Mouse? Public Art in Houston," *Cite*, Fall 1990, pp. 17-21.

5 Linker, Kate, "Public Sculpture: The Pursuit of the Pleasurable and Profitable Paradise," *Artforum*, March 1981, p. 64.

6 Although the interjection of real estate into the cultural market is beyond the scope of this article, its effect of making the builder a patron of the arts deserves mention. Out of the construction boom of the 1960s and early 1970s came various redevelopment programs that exploited art's roles as symbol, lure, advertisement, and emblem of urban prosperity.

7 Beardsley, John, *Art in Public Places: A Survey of Community-Sponsored Projects Supported by the National Endowment for the Arts*, ed. Andy Harney (Washington, D.C.: Partners for Livable Places, 1981).

8 Quoted in Robert Storr, "Tilted Arc: Enemy of the People," *Art in America*, September 1985, p. 92.

9 Lacy, Suzanne, "Fractured Space," in Arlene Raven, ed., *Art in the Public Interest* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1993), p. 299.

10 Lippard, Lucy, "Moving Targets/Moving Out," in Raven, ed., *Art in the Public Interest*, p. 209.