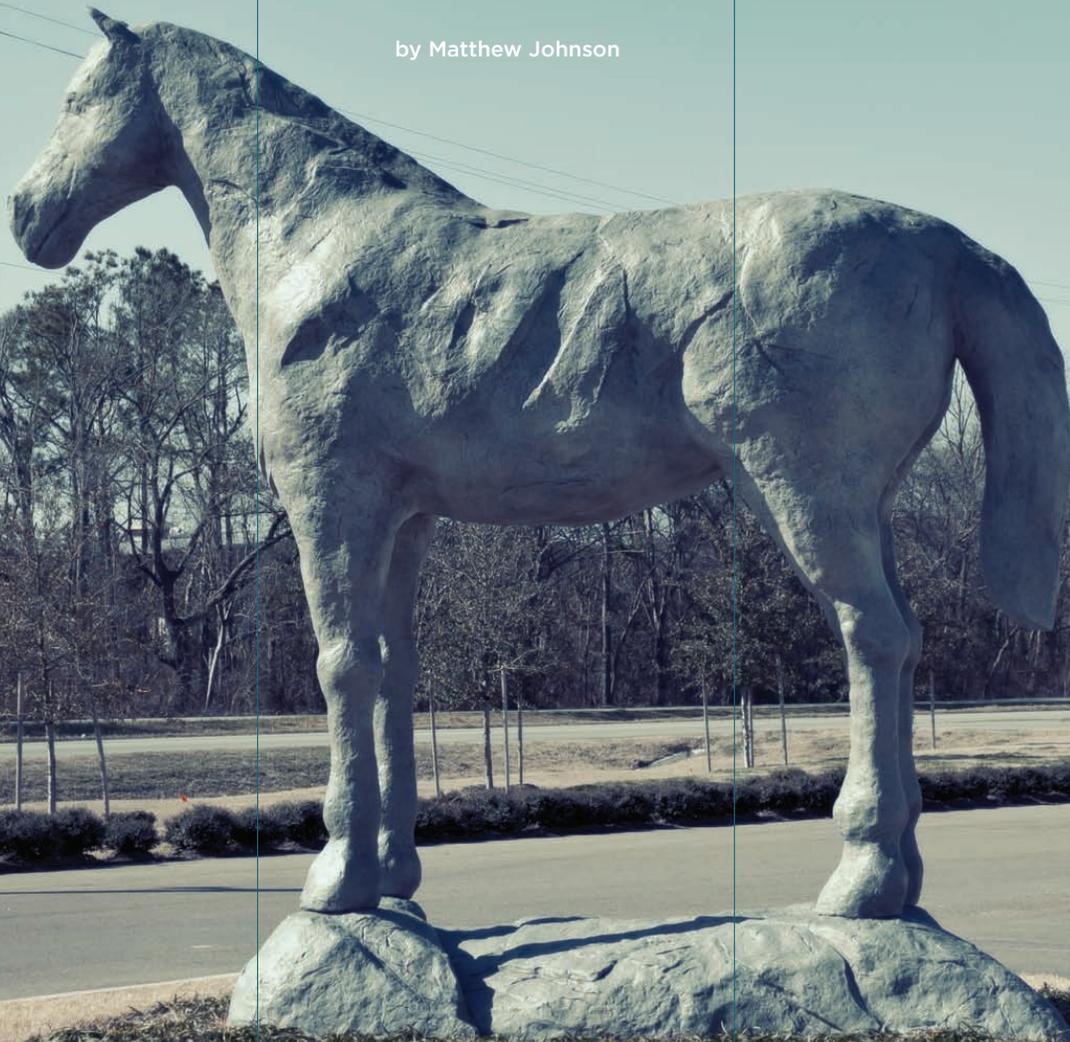


Public Art in Four Acts

HOUSTON ARTS ALLIANCE
NEGOTIATES A BABEL
OF CRITICS AND PATRONS

by Matthew Johnson





FOR YEARS NOW, HOUSTON HAS HAD A TRADITION OF CIVIC ART DRIVEN FROM THE BOTTOM UP—SCRAP SCULPTURES APPEARING IN VACANT LOTS, **IMPROMPTU** HAPPENINGS IN STRIP CENTERS, OLD HOUSES CONVERTED OVERNIGHT INTO GALLERIES. SUCH EVENTS HAVE TAKEN ADVANTAGE OF HOUSTON'S **DEEPLY INFORMAL** ATTITUDE TOWARD URBAN PLANNING, AND ITS EXCESS OF EMPTY SPACE. THOUGH THE CITY HAS NUMEROUS WORLD-CLASS ART COLLECTIONS AND MUSEUMS, THESE ARE CONCENTRATED MOMENTS IN A SPRAWLING CITY, WHEREAS THE LOCAL ARTS SCENE HAS TENDED TO BE DIFFUSE, SPREAD OUT, AND **AD HOC**.

Community-initiated projects such as the Spark Parks, the Orange Show, Project Row Houses, and the Art Car movement offer an improvised mix of the lowbrow and the not-quite-highbrow, evidence of the city's unstuffy, unselfconscious view of itself. Houston's public realm has tended to be shaped by the informal, in keeping with its reputation as a city where citizens, rather than institutions, make urban space.

A few years back, however, a loose assortment of public agencies banded together to address Houston's civic realm with more intentionality. The purpose was not to subvert or overshadow the vitality of Houston's informal arts scene, but to give the city

more focus when thinking about its own civic space. The Houston Arts Alliance (HAA) was created in 2006 by the fusion of the Municipal Arts Commission and the Cultural Arts Council of Houston/Harris County (CACH/H). Its mission is to coordinate efforts and public funding for the area's art organizations. The Civic Art Program was initiated by its founding director Jessica Cussick and is based on "The Houston Framework," a 1997 study funded by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). Civic art, the thinking went, could be a vehicle for building community, challenging the public, creating compelling public space, and bringing in tourist dollars.

For the last two years, Matthew Lennon has directed the civic art and design program for HAA. Lennon arrived in Houston by way of Ireland, the UK, and Seattle—a city often cited for its innovative civic programs—where he worked for similar agencies on public art projects. Lennon downplays the importance of iconic art or buildings in favor of what he calls "platforms for culture." Ultimately, he believes that the real strength of HAA's projects is

that they create "place makers," not isolated artworks set in the middle of otherwise empty plazas. Lennon says, "People ask me why we don't just hire famous artists to make copies of what they've done elsewhere. That doesn't interest me. What we want is to work with artists who understand how their works fit into a context."

HAA has been active in the public realm in the last few years, having completed 20 new civic projects, as well as over 35 conservation projects that rehabilitated historic works and spaces in Houston that had fallen into disrepair. These works occupy spaces in both Houston airports, at libraries, public works facilities, infrastructural crossings, and convention centers. Their engagement with Houston's urban realm has been diverse and widespread.

Lennon sees the possibility for civic design to make Houston into a "good city." But then he quickly questions what that means. "Really, what is a good city? It's a place that has more than just architecture or art. It has a culture of design and an appreciation for good urbanism." He points to Discovery Green



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as an example of a project that transformed the core of Houston into an active place. It isn’t so much the artworks as the integration of art, architecture, and intense programming that makes Discovery Green work. “Spaces like these,” he says, “can help Houston embrace the contemporary, to embrace urban design, and to move away from the suburban models that have defined us.”

CRITICS

In late 2008, the local Houston ABC News affiliate ran a weeklong series of commentaries by reporter Wayne Dolcefino under the title “Where’s the Art?” The pieces take an acerbic tone, lashing out in ad hominem attacks on both HAA and the artworks it has funded. The implication of the commentaries is not only that HAA has not produced enough art, given the money it was granted, but also that the artworks produced are the wrong kind. Dolcefino is a heavyset man with a gravelly voice and a tough Northeast accent who comes across as aggressively no-nonsense. His pieces use selective quotes and quick montages to create an impression of an arts funding infrastructure that is simultaneously out of control and doing nothing. (Many of the shots in his reports are ominously backlit and rotated slightly, the famous “Dutch tilt” used to convey vague menace in films.) One of the artworks receiving the most vitriol from Dolcefino is a relatively innocuous and attractive structure in Discovery Green called *Synchronicity of Color* by Margo Sawyer (completed 2008), which draws on the rich legacy of minimalists such as Donald Judd. Dolcefino’s primary criticism of the sculpture isn’t directed at its urban and artistic effect (which he seems to care little about) but at its cost. In his commentaries, he

starts from the assumption that the role of public art is merely to serve as a vehicle for tourist revenue with no other purpose, essentially reducing it to a moneymaking device. (Matthew Lennon points out that HAA’s Civic Art and Design Program receives no “HOT money,” that is the Hotel Occupancy Tax that funds arts programming with the aim of drawing in tourists. All funding is through the 1.75 percent Capital Improvement Project ordinance for civic art and design.)

As Dolcefino says in one of the reports, “We’ve gotten an earful from artists about my supposed lack of culture because they are under the mistaken impression that we spend tax money just to create art. In fact, we spend hotel tax money on art to bring in tourists to fill up hotel rooms.” This cynical position—that public art is only there to bring in tourist dollars—seems to ignore an entire history of artistic production and engagement. Rather than ask whether public art can bring communities together, help to define a neighborhood or city, or ask critical questions about urban development, Dolcefino punts. He misses the complex questions about the role of art in city life, instead reducing artwork to a kind of urban decoration that, he implies, should be cheap, broadly appealing, and innocuous. His commentaries left me asking who, in his mind, should decide the content and role of civic art. The man on the street? The news reporter? The municipal accountant? Or is he saying that civic art shouldn’t exist at all?

MAKERS

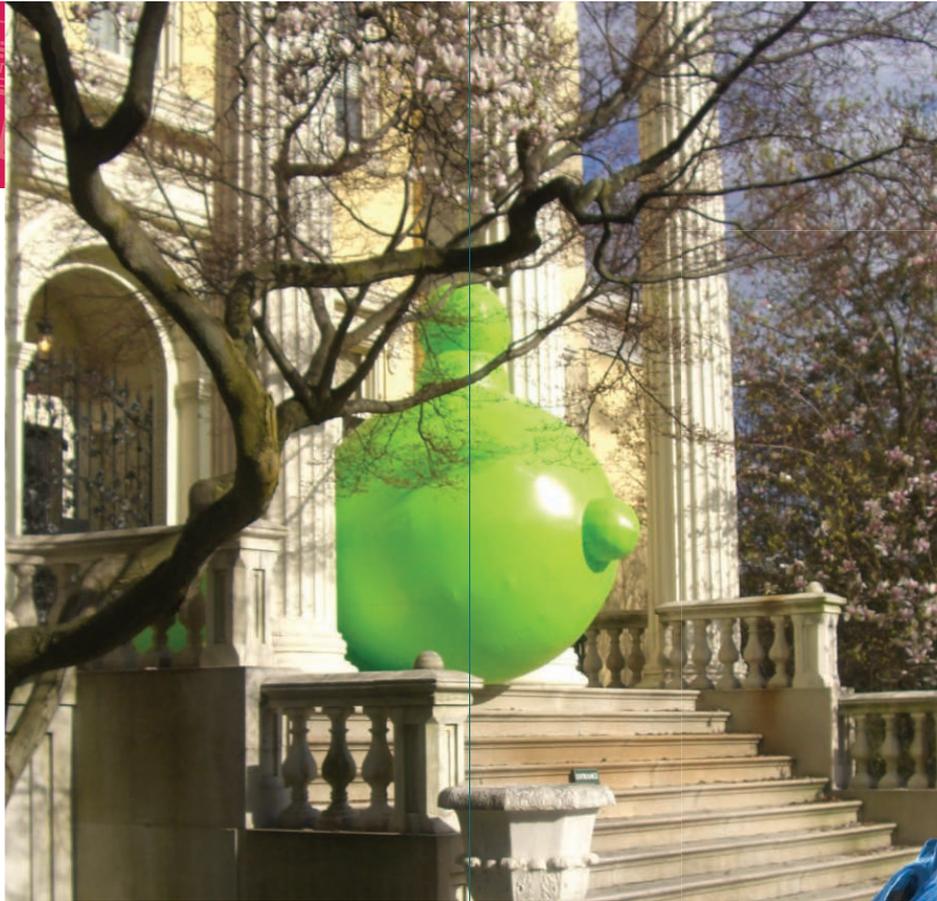
Sawyer’s *Synchronicity of Color* marked the beginning of a very productive period for HAA’s civic art program. Since 2008, approximately 20 projects have reached completion, some in urban spaces such as Market Square, though most are in or around multi-service centers, public works facilities, airports, and other sites spread across Houston’s sprawl. One of Dolcefino’s criticisms—that the program had little to show for its funding—has an answer in the volume of new work.

When Dolcefino laments the expense of the works of art, he pretends that arts funding is taken from public wallets and evaporates into nothing. Architect Joe Meppelink points out that those funds in fact are pumped directly back into the local economy. In a broad sense, civic art has an outside impact on the

local economy because the funds circulate through industries and create a multiplier effect. This answer, however, assumes that civic art’s primary benefit is as some sort of abstract economic stimulator. As Meppelink points out, civic art should serve a much greater purpose than that: it should enrich and challenge. His firm Metalab often collaborates with artists on large-scale public art projects that depend on a broad cross-section of local businesses. Around 80 percent of the spending for one of these major works happens in Houston, employing architects, structural engineers, construction managers, construction workers, fabricators, and so on.

Meppelink cites an interesting example from his own hometown of Grand Rapids, Michigan. “Back in the late sixties,” he says, “the city hired Alexander Calder to create a sculpture, two shapes sort of locked together.” The sculpture was a stabile called *La Grande Vitesse*. It stood 43 feet tall in bright red steel. Many in the town were incensed that public funds had been used to create this abstract work, which was called “ugly” in letters to the local newspaper and was mocked in cartoons. In fact, it was the first example of a NEA-funded work in the United States, using a \$45,000 grant. Despite those citizen critics pushing for the sculpture to be removed, the town’s leaders decided that it could remain. And now, Meppelink says, the sculpture appears on every street sign and marketing image the city puts out. This challenging thing—a modernist sculpture!—has become the city’s focal point and pride. “They bought an icon,” Meppelink says.

One could point to other cities whose public artworks have functioned as “mini-Bilbao,” drawing in tourists and locals alike. Chicago’s Millennium Park has become a model for a thriving urban park, punctuated by Anish Kapoor’s *Cloud Gate*, a gigantic, perfectly mirrored steel bean in the middle of the park. Likewise, Seattle reinvigorated the urban realm with its new Olympic Sculpture Park, a kind of menagerie of contemporary art. The latter park includes works by Richard Serra, Louise Bourgeois, Claes Oldenburg, Mark Dion, and again Calder, who provided a red steel piece that, incidentally, very closely resembles *La Grande Vitesse*. The value of a place like the Olympic Sculpture Park, however, isn’t so much in its atomized collection of individual artworks, but in the civic space that they collectively create.



ABOVE: *Green Golly*, Sharon Engelstein, 2008, fabric and forced air, commissioned by the Evergreen Museum and Library in Baltimore. RIGHT: *Vaquero*, Luis Jimenez, 1978, restored 2009, Moody Park.

ARTISTS AND THEIR ART

Sharon Engelstein, a Houston artist, was chosen a few years back to design public art for HAA. Most of Engelstein's work is not figural. She creates gigantic abstract forms that vaguely suggest balloon animals, deformed eggs, or even architecture, but she resists any literal figure, scene, or theme. Her works use playfully subversive or even erotic forms to agitate stiff and formal public spaces. They work most effectively when they are most out of place—for instance, a huge lime green balloon-figure forces its way through a neoclassical façade, in her work *Green Golly*. Yet when Engelstein was asked to create a work of art for the Houston Mounted Police/Animal Services Facility, she found herself at the receiving end of a committee process that wanted a sculpture of horses. Not abstracted horses, akin to her other pieces, but literal horses. She had never created an equestrian sculpture in her life. As she says, "HAA was set up to screen and hire public artists. They're curators in some sense, and they're good at it. But the artists still have to answer to the powers that be—in my case, the police department." Thus, despite the absence of literal figuration in her work, Engelstein initially designed a carousel of 38 cast aluminum horses (and two dogs). Through the committee process, this was whittled down to two dogs and a single large horse, standing firmly upright. Called *Your Loyal Mighties*, it was placed at the entrance to the facility. "The ultimate and final say is with the public entity where you're installing the art," says Engelstein.

I saw the sculpture at the Mounted Police/Animal Services Facility. What is installed there feels foreign to Engelstein's other work, almost as if it had been created by a different artist. The police department, who strongly suggested the theme to her, may not have seen or understood her other work, yet Engelstein was hired by HAA based on the strength of her portfolio. Thus, the process seems to have undermined her ability to create from her own unique vision—the very quality that she was hired for. When art is designed by committee, in a bureaucratic version of the Surrealist game *Exquisite Corpse*, it is unsurprising that the results might leave everyone involved dissatisfied. Though policemen and firemen perform an admirable service, they are typically not artists. They are not trained in the history of art, nor do they necessarily understand or appreciate it. Yet in the process of making public art, these kinds of public servants become key decision makers: they have the power to make suggestions about themes, content, materials, placement, and so on. More than that, they have veto power. Engelstein's experience suggests that the expertise of civic artists is sometimes undermined by a process that seeks general agreement, one in which the artist is only a single, small voice. The question





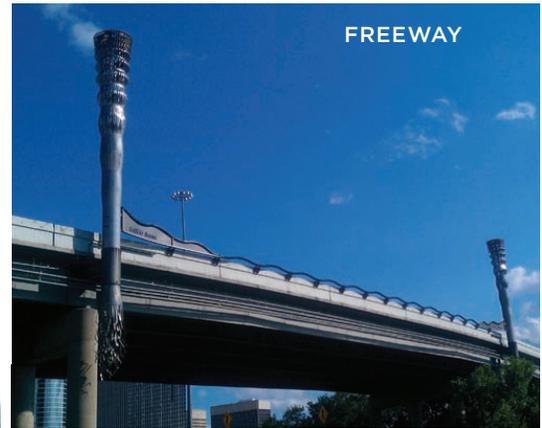
BAYOU



Priorities

The Houston Framework, a 1997 report, identified five priority locations for public art: bayous, freeways, Main Street, major intersections, and untraditional sites like shopping centers and airport terminals.

FREEWAY



MAIN STREET



AIRPORT



OPPOSITE PAGE CIOCKWISE FROM TOP: *Tolerance*, Jaime Plensa, 2011, Allen Parkway at Studemont; Sculpture at I-45 over Buffalo Bayou; *Vector HH*, Luca Buvoli, 2010, (metal and cast acrylic), Hobby Airport; Public art at University of Houston Downtown station; *Open Channel Flow*, Matthew Geller, 2009, Sabine Street Water Pump.

is whether this art-by-consensus approach creates dumbed-down works that in attempting to appeal to everyone, in fact appeal to no one.

Lennon has a slightly different take on the issue. He sees the role of the civic artist as that of a collaborator who is interested in process and dialogue. As Lennon says, “My concern is often not so much about the design, which is obviously important, but about choosing an artist who we know can work within the process.”

Other public works have perhaps been more successful in uniting an artist’s vision with challenging themes that promote community dialogue. In 1980, artist Luis Jimenez designed a statue for Moody Park called *Vaquero*, meant to parody traditional equestrian works. The sculpture depicts an exaggerated Mexican gunfighter in a sombrero atop a bucking electric-blue horse, pistol held high. Initial reaction to the piece was heated. Jimenez meant for the sculpture to call attention to the neglected role of vaqueros—Mexican cowboys—in the American West, but community members accused him of promoting a violent pistolero stereotype. Over the years, the sculpture has weathered and faded. In that time, museums across the nation took note of Jimenez’ risky, bold depictions of controversial subjects, and hired him to create other site-specific artworks. A version of *Vaquero* now stands at the entrance to the Smithsonian Museum of American Art in Washington DC. Noting this, private donors here in Houston have in the last few years worked with HAA to rehabilitate the sculpture and restore its bright color to Moody Park.

Another emblematic example is Jaime Plensa’s new sculpture *Tolerance*, recently installed at the corner of Allen Parkway and Montrose Boulevard. The piece depicts seven gigantic figures formed of stainless steel letters from the world’s alphabets. The statues are situated under a grove of oaks, kneeling, as if in penance. They also punctuate a new bridge that crosses Memorial Drive and connects the two sides of Buffalo Bayou. Though *Tolerance* lacks the risky conviction of *Vaquero*, on a recent Sunday, the Plensa sculpture was surrounded by families taking

pictures and joggers resting among the genuflecting forms. This highly-visible work seems to imply that the entire bayou along Allen Parkway could become an activated public space, full of interactions and civic life. It suggests a future for Houston’s civic art not as adornments to empty plazas, but as place makers for activity.

So what should the role of public art be? Should it be merely urban decoration, attractive elements that paper over otherwise functional structures such as bathrooms and parking lot entrances? Or should it serve some broader community-building or critical purpose? Once upon a time, public art consisted primarily of monuments to the heroic dead, public fountains, and adornments to buildings. One thinks locally of the San Jacinto Monument or the Sam Houston statue at the entrance to Hermann Park. In the modern period, however, the message of public art has broadened (like modern art itself) to encompass themes of political integration, critique, and abstraction.

In a now-famous episode in 1989, Richard Serra’s COR-TEN steel sculpture *Tilted Arc*, with its subtle minimalist shape, was removed from a New York plaza because it disrupted the direct passage of office workers through the plaza. This abstract work, calling into question both monumentality and figural art, came to be seen as a public nuisance—an impediment to pedestrian flow. Much of the initial opposition was to the price of the sculpture (\$175,000), but it was also derided by those who simply did not appreciate modern art. After a series of courtroom hearings and appeals, federal workers arrived one night, sliced the massive sculpture into three pieces, and hauled it away. Serra said later of the episode, “I don’t think it is the function of art to be pleasing. Art is not democratic. It is not for the people.” Many casual readers of this quote probably miss its nuance, as well as its reference to the challenging artworks of the twentieth century. The

demolition of *Tilted Arc* ignited a series of debates in the 1990s about the proper role of public art. Even though this debate has subsided somewhat in recent years, it still emerges periodically, as the Dolcefino commentaries have shown, with the argument about art as public nuisance recast now to be about art as financial burden. But one senses that the real debate has little to do with nuisances or funding. These perennial arguments are between those who understand, appreciate, and support art’s place in the civic realm and those who do not. One person looks at public art and sees the possibility for cultural enrichment; another looks at it and sees wasted funds. The opposition between the two appears hard to bridge.

Ultimately, Houston must decide what it wants from its public arts program—what its real purpose is. Is it to bring in tourist dollars and placate the broader public, as Dolcefino seems to suggest? Should it cleave to the true legacy of modern art by creating provocations that are often (but not always) beautiful, while also serving as a site of discussion and gathering for a complex, diverse city? Or is the argument really not even about art at all, but about the civic spaces into which this art is inserted? As Sharon Engelstein says, “Art is supposed to be challenging. It’s there for enrichment, and it can be a vehicle for political discussion.” Or Matthew Lennon: “Our role is really in economic and civic development. At the same time, we’re trying to make Houston more bold and contemporary. Houston has a ruggedness and a willingness to take risks that could really work for us in the public realm, if only we’d let it.” A number of recent examples, from the grove of Plensa’s *Tolerance* to the intense programming of Discovery Green, point toward the possibility of a rich civic life for Houston in which artworks do not merely adorn urban space but frame and activate it. These activated spaces, however, require a full engagement with architecture, landscape, and even infrastructure. In some sense, art is beside the point, since art is often most successful when reflecting attention on its surrounding issues, dialogues, and spaces. The best public art is a mirror for the city that it inhabits. ■