



# Expanding Cultures

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## CO-PUBLICS: DEFENDED TERRITORIES AND CITIZENSHIP

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### Abstract

*Reflection at the least, resolution at the best, critique is fundamental for the arts both to face challenges and develop improved outcomes. The presentation intends to unpack key questions: Who drives the project – commissioner, curator or facilitator, public/ niche community? What are the impacts upon the quality of work? Is there an opportunity for the expression of counter publics? Does the proposed project present a parochial perspective or incorporate multi-cultural viewpoints? Is there a pitch or a sound contemporary argument? By incorporating critical practice and asking such questions we can think more broadly about what constitutes public art and community development projects*

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*Art is what we do. Culture is what is done to us.*

Carl Andre

Public art can always be better. Critique consistently focuses on reviewing processes broadly. The impact of public art projects is considered to be limited by narrow definitions and restrictive practices; the importance of creative leadership, strategy and public art expertise are key success factors; nevertheless, new approaches are needed to open-up lateral opportunities and extend public art. A lack of critical review, particularly of the aesthetic qualities of an individual artwork, is understandable, since the constant realities of managing multiple projects only requires that projects be completed on time and budget. However, it does not allow much space for criticality.

Public art must engage in critical debate and unpack key questions, often ignored, such as: Who drives the project – commissioner, curator or facilitator, public / niche community and what are the impacts upon the quality of work? Is there an opportunity for the expression of counter publics? Does the proposed project present a parochial perspective rather than incorporating multi-cultural viewpoints? Is there a pitch or a sound contemporary argument? Importantly, by incorporating critical practice and regularly asking such questions it allows us to think more broadly about what constitutes public art and community development projects.

This paper also intends to further advocate for curatorial involvement in public art projects. This has often been advocated for, but apparently continues to fall on deaf ears. It's unfortunate that in this country we de-value this kind of expertise and continue to be suspicious of our intelligentsia. Here, it seems anyone can be a curator; that it doesn't require any special skills, expertise, or developed craftsmanship.

### **Differing agendas: Who owns or is responsible for public space?**

There is no denying that since the introduction of public art polices, nationally and internationally, the cultural landscape has changed. Public art is expected to contribute to the regeneration of the social, economic and built-environments. Policies abide by similar commissioning processes including 'Public Art Advisory Groups' (PAAGs), but have differing advantages and disadvantages in their ambiguities.

The introduction of art into the public realm should fundamentally aim to democratise public space. In classic and modern art and architecture both fields were closely aligned and this integration seemed natural. However, since art and architecture's interests have diverged, the relationship between artists and architects has become forced. According to Andrew Nimmo, artists and architects have become competitors for attention and funds. He states that, 'allocating enough funds and sourcing good artists will not necessarily lead to successful projects. Unless there is an acknowledgment of the importance of process (both in delivery and in the production), public art projects will continue to be conceptually marginalised from their sites.' (Nimmo, 2001, p.98)

Many practitioners know quite precisely how to deliver a project, particularly within the existing parameters, specifically how to deliver a permanent artwork made to look built-in. However, artists continue to be employed or allocated a space to rectify a design flaw. It's an unrealistic expectation. We need to be much more decisive about allocating budgets appropriately. Many of our issues stem from a lack of critical practice principles and processes. We have the know-how, but we tend to lack the know-why.

While the necessity for a committee is understandable when public money is being spent, one of the most common arguments against public art is that it's 'art by committee'. Whilst the artist and or curator are publicly known, the actions of the client are justified by the PAAG. This is a frequently anonymous committee that draws responsibility away from the contractual client and representative. However, within these committees there's inevitably a member more assertive with the contractual client and for all intents and purposes may as well be the 'real' client.

This arbitrary process can become even more muggy and ambiguous under the Queensland State Government's ever popular, Design and Construct contracts. This contractual relationship is an unpopular commercial reality for architects and on the surface it translates to artists, but it enables the client to become a slippery moving target. An artist may only present to the PAAG as little as two times and may never discern who the client really is. (Image 1: Materials from Public, New York 2007. Photo: D.Eckersley.)

A key question is who really owns or is responsible for public space? Is it the contractual client, the builder, or a real client pulling the strings behind the scenes? How do these 'clients' really represent the interests of the public? And who advocates for and supports artists and their work within a public art project? Curators and project managers' expected alliance is contractually with the client. But why can't a curator be contracted to support the artist in negotiating a better outcome?

The situation changes dramatically in private sector work. Developers also initiate a kind of PAAG. However, the client is the client and all the people in the room are directly relevant to the project and are able to assist quickly. What is particularly successful is that stakeholders develop and negotiate agendas in partnership. The private sector is more responsive to sound contemporary arguments by their contracted experts. Furthermore, there is also an expectation that concepts will engage in a competition of ideas. Importantly, private clients don't assume their audience or market to be conservative and traditional.

### **Defended territories and citizenship**

There are barriers to taking responsibility, but a need for it to be claimed. We really need to open up these decision-making processes and proactively invite public critique and debate concerning public art and design planning. In Australia, we defend decision-making territory quite well. We distance the responsibilities of decision-making processes. It's worth examining the psychology and reasoning of decision-makers and how arguments are constructed and their validity in retrospect. (Image 2: Erwin Wurm *Thinking of Spinoza*, installation and performance view, 2007. Photo: D. Eckersley.)

One of the most consistently irritating things about public art is the lack of time. Clients pussy-foot around for months extracting the public art from the overall construction process. They continually limit its capacity until curators are eventually contracted to deliver research within weeks. The artists then have even fewer weeks to develop their own research and to deliver installed works. Professionals involved in the construction work are typically afforded the time to do their work, so why aren't we? Projects in the broader arts industry can take up to two years to research and present; there's space for discussion, debate and to negotiate constraints.

As indicated, the public sector has a lack of genuine confidence in public art. They create barriers that de-value the potential contribution and deny 'The Power of Display' (Foucault). It assumes that its audience is conservative and traditional, or at least confines public art to respond to the lowest common denominator. The private sector clients know and certainly don't discount that their consumers are well educated, confident, progressive, have a keen interest in politics and public affairs, are likely to be involved in social issue activities, the arts, travel and accumulate signs of success.

There are many instances when the elusive independent client scenario supports contemporary practices. For example, *The Three Functions of Public Art* by Hewitt & Jordan in collaboration with David Beech, curated by Gavin Wade. The initial commission began at the Public Art Forum's (now ixia) annual conference in 2003, as part of a work titled *I won an artist in a raffle*. Conference delegates entered a raffle to win the opportunity to commission new work by Hewitt & Jordan. The winner, who after some discussion about how they might collaborate said, 'just make what you like'.

Using critique as material, the resulting work examines the tensions and contradictions that exist within public art practice and how it functions in support of the dominant ideology. In order to reveal the hegemony within culture, the artists chose to textually describe how public art functions in the broadest of cultural contexts. *The Three Functions of Public Art* are: *The economic function of public art is to increase the value of private property; The social function of public art is to subject us to civic behaviour; and The aesthetic function of public art is to codify social distinctions as natural ones.* (Hewitt & Jordan, 2003)

### **Developing a Critical Mass**

The benefits of working with curators are underlined by the history, knowledge and experience of the arts industry. Successful curatorial practice relies jointly on specialist, experiential knowledge and a more generalist practice, which is extremely difficult to gain unless one is working in close proximity with artists and works of art.

Importantly, curators facilitate and support a critical reception for contemporary artwork as it emerges and can accommodate spaces for awkwardness. The sense of alienation experienced by many viewers in relation to contemporary art can't be denied. Public art practices tend to ignore that audiences expect a degree of interpretation and explanation. Curators work as co-curators and collaborators, in tandem with other experts. They work across different platforms for diverse audiences leading to an exchange of ideas and a more dynamic visual arts sector.

Questions surrounding alternative approaches, specifically exhibition practices, have been intractably fixed with anti-commodification, or at least a critique of commodification. However, in a strategic gesture of resistance, alternatives can be subsumed by the system and become a product of what they critique: museums-in-miniature, ideally with populist, socially uplifting missions. Simultaneously, restrained federal, state and local funding, and shifts to 'social' rather than aesthetic causes also define value. Governments may play a role in building up a taste for the arts, but will not, in any permanent way, help the public to afford them. Art is good for the public, but not something to which the public is entitled.

This idea of what the public is entitled to is directly contradicted and challenged by contemporary practices. Such as the giveaway concept in Felix Gonzalez-Torres' work, that has been described 'as a model example of the democratic dissemination of art.' (Penzel, 2002, p.101) Proactive artists and curators can enable viewers to become direct participants.

A contemporary curator constructs relationships within a given project and their identity and subjectivity should be declared and transparent. Curators can occupy a unique position that opens up decision-making processes. They can proactively invite public critique and debate concerning public art. This taking of responsibility can facilitate a sense of ownership of public space by artists and audiences. (Image 3: Monica Bonvicini *Desire*, The Sculpture Center New York, 2007. Photo: L. Rollman.)

Developing a program of evaluation, particularly critical practice that includes invited verbal assessment and published reviews, has the potential to improve outcomes. These concepts may be addressed in ephemeral ways such as dialogue/lecture programs or the undertaking and presentation of a research project. The strategies of critical practice will better establish a reception for artworks and support audience development.

Reflection at the least, resolution at the best, critique is fundamental for the arts in order to both face challenges and develop improved outcomes. Habitual challenging and deconstruction of tidy paradigms is a daunting exercise for many, particularly administrators new to the processes. Incorporation of critique often means circumventing the path of least resistance. However, this defiance can also mean sounding a robust reception for artworks and further supporting audience development.

## References

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Monica Bonvicini Desire, The Sculpture Centre New York, 2007. Photo: L. Rollman



Erwin Wurm Thinking of Spinoza, installation and performance view, 2007. Photo: D. Eckersley



Materials from Public, New York 2007. Photo: D.Eckersley