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In her collection of essays, *Deep Design*, art historian Libby Lumpkin characterizes the ubiquitous "happy face" (the circle with dots for eyes and the dogmatic smile) as a "free floating signifier" that insinuates its way into all areas of life. It is disconcerting to see a growing number of "happy face" and "user friendly" public art projects intended to amend and enhance public spaces in the United States. These generally unremarkable projects alarmingly proliferate, but I am not yet prepared to dismiss the significant role that artists can play in shaping the artifactual, social, and spatial realms of public life. The good news is that there are promising, yet not sufficiently examined, alternative practices.

This is the inaugural of an annual series of quarterly reports on public art in the United States. I was delighted when the Public Art Forum presented this very intriguing and challenging opportunity to periodically present and ponder issues and developments in the discursive field of public art. Of course, it also is daunting. There are many organizations, individuals, practitioners, and emerging projects nationally. Identifying and selecting significant issues is an undertaking that I look forward to, as well as a responsibility that I accept with serious intent. Let me begin with a humbling and persistent lament. An often-cited problem (crisis) of public art is the paucity of sustained, energetic, and diverse critical and theoretical discourse. What is going on and why? What does it mean? Where are the critical voices that can deepen a cultural perspective on public art? If the "crisis of criticism" will not be the sole preoccupation of this series of field reports, it invariably will form a sub-text that moves through future essays.

In a few days I will speak at a public art conference at the University of Wisconsin. Participants have been challenged to consider, among other questions, if public art needs a new paradigm? Is the field instrumentally and ideologically impaired? Are many existing models inoperative or exhausted? So I offer some formative thoughts on the paradigmatic – or how we might think about this question.

Finding our way through a thicket of claims, ill-fated aspirations, and diminished expectations what are the most pervasive – and persuasive – models or tactics of contemporary public art? In the post-Kennedy era, the objective of public art programs was to bring the work of acclaimed artists into cities and communities. Alexander Calder's *Grand Vitesse* (1967) in Grand Rapids, Michigan and other large sculptures have become iconic in United States cities. Legislation of the 1980s was a direct assault on this kind of "plunk art." New initiatives and directives advised that public art should adapt responsively to the physical, palpable conditions of a site. Site wasn't something to absent-mindedly walk across to get to the other side. Sites were places with historical character, palpable presence, and imminent potential. Guided by a solution-oriented design sensibility, artists began to integrate their work through an investigation of architectural program and an application of appropriate scale and materials. The work generally was durable, defensible (in some respects), and functional providing seating, shelter, and other features and amenities. It was winningly, if worrisomely, accommodating.

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Generally, models don't instantly disappear into extinction; they co-exist with new initiatives, battling for legitimacy and currency. These great object and design-driven models of public art persist, but more recent public art initiatives have produced an exciting, if difficult, variety of social, political, and activist forms – installations, interventions, performances, and multiple forms of collaboration that engage urgent subjects with a passionate, often eclectic hybridity.

Some of this work invokes some concept of community in all of its complex and contradictory characteristics. But frequently, the quotidian, intangible, and immaterial character of the work is hobbled by extraordinary claims and expectations about what this kind of art should accomplish, produce, or change in the lives of people. It is misguided and presumptuous to predict what art will do in the lives of people? And is it even more preposterous to predict what art may cause people to do? Claims of efficacy are impossible to prove and disturbingly easy to dismiss. The enthusiastic rhetoric, however genuine and passionate, for this kind of work often stimulates skepticism and creates a critical environment of perennial failure. What is it enough for public art to do? Projects founder under the weight of great assertions and unrealistic expectations, but they also can vanish, victims to a studied subtlety or insignificance. What is too much or too little for public art to do?

At the 2004 annual conference of the College Art Association, a national organization of art historians, artists, scholars, and university teachers, several panels examined public art. A panel organized by artist Bradley McCallum and the organization Conjunction Arts considered the intricate, if ambiguous relationship of current funding strategies and priorities and critical discourse. How do new programs and initiatives shape and stimulate a critical language and, alternately, when does criticism influence cultural policy-makers? With the slow, agonizing decline of the National Endowment of the Arts, independent foundations and not-for-profit organizations have developed programs in cultural development that support artists' projects in under-served communities. How will these programs influence an emerging critical framework for public art? As artists work within communities with disenfranchised young people or other over-looked constituencies, or address crises and conflicts including domestic or gang violence, drug use, and poverty, how do critics engage intent, process, and outcome? What constitutes success? How is significance determined?

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As we encounter these projects of visible and vital civility, how do concepts of public change? Acknowledging that people bring different resources, expectations, and skepticism to projects, how do we articulate ideas of success, effectiveness, and the relationship of aesthetics to social engagement? How do we consider results in these aesthetic practices? How do foundations and other funding organizations determine if resources have been used creatively and responsibly? How do the power relationships incumbent in this kind of work become a subject of critical discourse? And how can artists, critics, and supporters of public art help to insure that collaborative, interdisciplinary practices do not rigidify into another orthodoxy. Or do the questions themselves lead us down a slippery slope that diminishes or dismisses the unpredictable, inadvertent, and incalculable character of aesthetic work?

How do we continue to sustain and critically engage a diversity of discursive creative practices and projects in the public realm? Howard Zinn, populist historian and author of *A People's History of the United States*, constructs a history through the acts of many individuals undertaking and achieving small tasks and goals. Zinn articulates a historical vision of multiple, if uneven, shareholders. Citing Michel de Certeau in his introduction to the collection of interviews *Interventions and Provocations*, Glenn Harper distinguishes between the fixed nature of strategies and the flexible insinuations of tactics. What are some of the multiple tactical practices that we might identify and support? And do these different trajectories suggest new directions, as well as invoke a more discursive, yet energetic critical environment for public art?

As artists, communities, and supporters continue to initiate and pursue work that advances ideas of community and cultural development, it is important to keep sight of the aesthetic dimension of public art practices. While not advancing the retrograde idea that art is a strictly retinal experience, artists should be encouraged to fortify their roles as makers and shapers of an increasingly homogenous visual environment. There has been a de-materialization, as well as degradation of artistic practices. Artists often work within the intangibilities and immaterialities of community relationships, or sometimes accept unprogressive opportunities to create visual diversion. Enduring or ephemeral, public art must maintain a fruitful triad of the artifactual, social, and spatial. The aesthetic is not unproblematic, but it is one of the most opportunistic, imaginative, tactical, and critical resources at our disposal. The poetics of creative production and performance can offer significant connections between disparate communities and individuals. There is a restive, resistant evidentiary dimension of public art that should never be abdicated or overlooked.

In future field reports I hope to more directly engage some of the issues and preoccupations cited here.

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