

# Chapter 1 Introduction: A Short History of the United States’ “Official” Public Art

Just six months before his tragic assassination in November 1963, John F. Kennedy responded to a report on the status of arts in the federal government he requested the year before. Writing to the report’s author, August Heckscher, the President noted:

Government can never take over the role of patronage and support filled by private individuals and groups in our society. But government surely has a significant part to play in helping establish the conditions under which art can flourish – in encouraging the arts as it encourages science and learning. (JFK qtd. in Netzer 1978: 58)

Here Kennedy staked an ideological claim for public support of the arts, building a foundation for the United States’ official art patronage. Yet there remains no definitive interpretation of “exactly what public art is, or ought to be” (Allen 1985: 246). If we define “public art” by its most basic precepts, then its roots reach far back in history. Its works are conceived for larger audiences, and placed to garner their attention; meant to provide an edifying, commemorative, or entertaining experience; and convey messages through generally comprehensible content. Meeting the public on its daily travels, these artworks reinforced the agendas of those under whose aegis they were constructed: ranging from countless portraits of ancient rulers, designed to bolster confidence and inspire loyalty; to massive pieces of street furniture, like triumphal arches proclaiming

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the military prowess of particular regimes. But the notion of art in the service of the people, rather than ruling factions, is a more modern concept. One thinks, for example, of citizens emboldened by the French Revolution demanding that the Louvre, a private palace housing royal treasures, be opened to the people of the Republic (which did happen on August 10, 1793). As Carol Duncan suggests, public art institutions and initiatives became “evidence of political virtue, indicative of a government that provided the right things for its people,” while being “a preserver of past achievements and a provider for the common good” (1991: 88–9, 93, 101–2).

While many European nations have well-established, widely supported traditions of state patronage, it is only in the last century that the US made sustained efforts in this endeavor. Although the evolution of our government’s arts patronage was not necessarily “orderly” (Prokopoff 1981: 78), it is illuminating. Americans remain admiring of European culture and even state support of it, though historically our attitudes toward the arts are “ambiguous and contradictory.” In the absence of a “clear public philosophy regarding the value and place of art in society” (Wyszomirski 1982: 11), some citizens took it upon themselves to commission or make art. In 1872 Philadelphia neighbors Henry Fox and Charles Howell spearheaded the Fairmount Park Art Association, the US’s first private nonprofit organization focused on integrating public art and urban planning. Still thriving today, the Association cooperates with civic agencies to commission artworks responsive to the city’s layout and spirit (Bach 1988: 262–3). With the turn of the twentieth century came the short-lived but influential City Beautiful Movement, whose proponents, envious of European urbanism, contended that social responsibility and order would follow in the wake of meticulous planning. Charles Mulford Robinson epitomizes this mindset: he conceived of a “civic art” with utilitarian, moral, and educational functions, which “exists not for its own sake, but mainly for the good of the community” (1903: 26–9, 35). The Depression next advanced our government’s arts patronage, but it was not until the 1960s that this role was formalized on more permanent terms. Garry Apgar posits that American pragmatism tends to resist state patronage for the arts, though he recognizes that “fundamentally democratic approaches to government support”

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have taken root here (1992: 24, 26). In this chapter we shall encounter three federal programs critical to the foundation and development of an "official" American public art: the New Deal art initiatives, which represented our first concerted effort to support artists while producing art underscoring state ideology; the General Services Administration's Art-in-Architecture program, in which a percentage of federal construction costs is allocated for the arts; and the no longer extant Art-in-Public-Places program of the National Endowment for the Arts, which offered matching grants to local communities. As we shall see, there are significant distinctions between cultural democracy "as a social idea" and political democracy "as a system of government" (Dewey 1927: 143).

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**Roosevelt's New Deal**

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The profound despair of life for many Americans in the 1930s (marked by the economic woes of the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl agricultural crisis) was offset by a series of socially progressive programs. Combined under the umbrella of "The New Deal," these were conceived and managed by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's administration. As Richard McKinzie asserts, the New Deal's intentions were altruistic: to attend to people's cerebral needs as much as their material ones (1973). In addition to addressing unemployment, business failures, and a lack of adequate food and shelter, the New Deal also positioned the federal government as a primary agent of social change and enlightenment, entrusted to ensure the welfare of all citizens. Despite its shortcomings, the New Deal got many Americans "back to work," including artists employed in "the largest art program ever undertaken by the federal government" (Park and Markowitz 1992: 131). From 1933 to 1943 thousands of artists produced over a hundred thousand artworks under the patronage of the American government, though as Dick Netzer reminds us, this was a temporary measure. The impetus was less "a special concern for artistic activity ... (or) a commitment to a permanent federal role in support of the arts," and more a matter of alleviating the dire economic climate (1978: 54).

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First came the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) in 1933, directed by Edward Bruce, which paid professional artists daily wages to make works for public buildings. But after seven short months it became clear that the PWAP's stopgap approach could not meet enduring needs. By 1935 the Federal Art Project (FAP), run under the Works Progress Administration (WPA), was established. The FAP remained intact until the New Deal's end in 1943, when the US's involvement in World War II intensified, and critics complained that any state-supported art smacked of fascism (Harris 1995: 153). The FAP, which was the largest and best-known of the art programs, served artists already on relief and disseminated their artworks to state and municipal facilities. Under the leadership of Holger Cahill, who was not inclined to judge the art's "quality," the FAP engendered progressive experimentation and offered public art demonstrations, classes, and lectures (McKinzie 1973: xi; Park and Markowitz 1984: 178).

Two other important New Deal art programs were administered by the Treasury Department. From 1935 to 1939 the Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP) employed artists, mostly those on relief, to decorate federal buildings whose construction was then managed by the Treasury. The second program was the Section of Fine Arts (initially named the Section of Painting and Sculpture), spurred by Edward Bruce's suggestion in 1934 that for each new federal building constructed, one percent of the total cost be set aside for its "embellishment." Under the leadership of Bruce (himself a painter and pragmatic administrator), Edward Rowan (another painter), and art critic Forbes Watson, the Section flourished until its closure in 1943. It commissioned individual artists for particular jobs, and offered anonymous competitions that "discovered" new talent (Prokopoff 1981: 78). The Section's decisions were not based on financial need, and rather than foster the collectivism of the FAP, its artists often continued in their private studio lives. Bruce insisted on aesthetic and technical standards in keeping with "good" art, convinced that exposure to such would enrich the quality of American life (McKinzie 1973: xi; Park and Markowitz 1984: 178). Thus the Section promoted more conventional styles that would not be off-putting to uninitiated eyes. As Marlene Park and Gerald Markowitz observe, the Section's "goal was to create a

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contemporary American art, neither academic nor avant-garde, but based on experience and accessible to the general public" (1992: 136). Through projects such as post office murals, the Section not only underscored the federal government's presence in communities large and small, but brought art into the realm of the everyday with recognizable subjects depicted through familiar means.

Perhaps the New Deal programs demonstrated not so much public support for the arts, as public endorsement of economic relief (Mankin 1982: 118, 136). Though Netzer is correct that in retrospect the New Deal is too often idealized as a "happy marriage of big government and the arts" (1978: 54), it did have lasting effects. The New Deal affirmed art's importance in a democratic society, built a significant national collection of public artworks, nurtured creative energies that might have otherwise perished, and laid the groundwork for federal arts funding. As characterized by Jonathan Harris, the New Deal programs also politicized culture within specifically populist terms, projecting an image of "social utopia" to be achieved through capitalist means. Stereotypes of the modern artist as an aloof loner or self-interested recluse were replaced with notions of the "productive worker" and "good citizen," loyal to the nation (1995: 4, 8–10). New Deal artworks were also intended to cultivate national pride in a shared culture, while buttressing belief in a faltered economy. Park and Markowitz write:

The New Deal sought to change the relationship between the artist and society by democratizing art and culture. Art project officials wrote that the mass of people were "underprivileged in art," and they endeavored to make art available to all ... projects were a uniquely American blend, combining an elitist belief in the value of high culture with the democratic ideal that everyone in society could and should be the beneficiary of such efforts. (1992: 131–2)

Thus there was a pronounced strain of cultural democracy in the New Deal: for the first time all citizens, regardless of their educational background, socio-economic class, or geographical region, were entitled to have art in their daily lives (Park and Markowitz 1984: xvii, 5, 181). Embedded in the New Deal were a multitude

  
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of evocative tensions that directly influenced the future of American public art. Among these was the massive entity of a federal government, attending to state, municipal, and individual needs; and the desire to make “high”-minded ideals accessible to the “average” person, while forging a cohesive cultural identity. The experimental nature of the programs was tempered by more conservative, “middle-of-the-road” aesthetics; frictions occurred between nationalist rhetoric and regionalist tastes, and the aim to provide for citizens’ material necessities while also enriching their cultural lives. Ironically, these goals were manifested through socialist strategies called upon to shore up American capitalism. These supposed contradictions are instructive for a populist treatment of public art, as they attest to the need for nuance and negotiation. Rather than dealing in absolutes, public art strives to reconcile popular will and collective aspirations with governmental oversight, private business, or the individual artist’s vision. But one might ask if such compromise necessarily leads to conventional ends as suggested by the Section’s agenda, or if it can offer challenges and provocation as had the FAP. Although the FAP remains the best-known New Deal art initiative, it was actually the Treasury Department’s programs that provided direct lineage for the next phase of federally sponsored art patronage in the US, the Art-in-Architecture program of the General Services Administration.



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**General Services Administration’s  
Art-in-Architecture Program**

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The groundwork for the Art-in-Architecture (A-i-A) program was laid in 1934, when Edward Bruce recommended that one percent of new federal building costs be earmarked for the commission of art. Eventually this proposal was implemented through the General Services Administration (GSA), the agency that oversees federal construction projects, and was made manifest with A-i-A’s inception in 1963. Often referred to as “percent-for-art,” A-i-A specified that up to one half of one percent of total construction costs for new federal buildings (later to include their repairs and alternations

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as well) be utilized to purchase contemporary works by American artists. The program was suspended in 1966 in response to inflated construction costs, and flack over Robert Motherwell's *New England Elegy* (JFK Building, Boston), a large Abstract Expressionist painting some people literally interpreted as a death scene. A-i-A was revived in 1972 under the Nixon administration, and since has provided consistent government arts patronage. In 1973 A-i-A began soliciting input from "expert" review panels convened by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) to avoid questions about the rigor of its selection process, which favored the wishes of project architects (Balfe and Wyszomirski 1987: 23–4). Yet the GSA retains final authority over artist selection and commission, rendering it a major taste-maker for American public art. Though the GSA has widely disseminated some excellent artworks, A-i-A projects range in quality and efficacy. Perhaps the most enduring effects of these efforts are not found in the physical works themselves, but in the public's greater awareness of public art, and the GSA's heightened sensitivity to the intricacies of placing it.

A-i-A helped solidify several philosophical precepts about the nature and function of public art in the US. The first is a simple assertion that truly "public" art should be literally *owned* by the citizens. Although commissioned by a federal agency, A-i-A artworks are understood to be property of the people, even when these might not accurately reflect prevailing tastes or engage the full comprehension of intended audiences. At times such art falls shy of the public's appreciation, especially when it shirks emotional and intellectual accessibility. Nonetheless, the general public's physical access to and ownership of art was cultivated, and a federally sponsored collection was amassed. Another philosophical current embedded in the A-i-A program is the (albeit gradual) recognition that public spaces and artworks are not interchangeable. The notion of a *site-sensitive* art, in which the particular location is taken into consideration, gained great currency as A-i-A became more conscious of placing artworks in hospitable spaces. This eventually led to *site-specific* approaches, in which the interaction between site and art is a prime determinant in the work's conception, design, and execution, with the art sometimes altering the site. The individual character of respective artworks and sites was increasingly acknowledged, and

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artists were more frequently commissioned to respond to particular places. Instead of glorified decorators sprucing things up at a project's end, artists consulted more often in the early planning stages.

A-i-A's percent-for-art formula subsequently became the model for many state and municipal art programs that also draw funds from construction budgets, and place art in sites such as schools and parks. In 1959 Philadelphia passed the first municipal percent-for-art ordinance in the US, followed next by Baltimore (1964), San Francisco (1967), and Seattle (1973). Hawaii became the first state to follow suit and adopted its percent-for-art policy in 1967. Yet, it would be misleading to say that the GSA consistently brought an enlightened approach to public art processes. Many A-i-A artists had little effect upon their sites' overall design, often commissioned to "formulate solutions compatible with an extant architectural conception" (Prokopoff 1981: 79). Some A-i-A works remain vigorously scrutinized by critics bemoaning the unfortunate proliferation of "plop art," guided by an "unstated assumption that a successful museum or gallery artist would be a successful public artist" (Senie 1992b: 230). Dubbed "turds in the plaza" by architect James Wines, such art is typified by the lone, epic, abstract sculpture, resting awkwardly in but unrelated to its vast surroundings. Its life being granted through percent-for-art dicta rather than an understanding of shared public culture, "plop art" cannot be saved by its egalitarian ambitions.

Although the GSA has aspired to greater outreach and consensus-building in the last few decades, emphasizing regional representation on selection panels and organizing meetings for artists and community members to discuss potential sites and local history, its heritage is still marked by some autocratic decision-making. The most enduring example of such was its 1979 commission of *Tilted Arc*, a 73-ton, 12-foot-high, 120-foot-long curved expanse of Cor-Ten steel, which self-oxidizes to yield a rusty patina. Artist Richard Serra conceived the work for its specific site, Federal Plaza (Jacob K. Javits Building, New York City), using pedestrian traffic patterns to determine both its form and placement. In 1989, eight years after its installation, *Tilted Arc* was dismantled under the cover of night. (Although this was authorized by the GSA's Acting

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Administrator, Dwight Ink, it was Regional Administrator William Diamond who pushed for the *Arc*'s removal.) It remains in storage indefinitely. Complaints about the work's aesthetic impoverishment (a brooding, corroded "wall"), impediment of the space's "social use" (open space in Manhattan being a precious commodity), and spoiling effect on the surrounding environment (supposedly it lured graffiti, litter, rats, and criminals into the plaza) were touted as the impetus for its "departure." In actuality, an even wider matrix of factors came into play. Countless articles and numerous books have debated the *Arc*'s relative merits and weaknesses and the legal battles over its removal, so a protracted account is unnecessary here. But that the *Arc* persists to remind us of a federal agency overstepping its boundaries (at least from the art world's perspective) is essential.

According to Serra, *Tilted Arc* was designed to forge social function from sculptural space, and visually link various governmental buildings. The artist hoped to reorient visitors' perceptual relationships, to "dislocate or alter the decorative function of the plaza and actively bring people into the sculpture's context" (Serra qtd. in Doss 1995: 32). But critics argued that Serra subjugated the plaza in servitude to his sculpture, being more concerned with physical rather than social context (McConathy 1987: 11–12). Steven Dubin suggests no "overt message" accounted for *Tilted Arc*'s problems, but rather it was Serra's aesthetic choices, "whose artful qualities eluded" the public (1992: 25). Described as a "sullen blade," "eyesore," and "iron curtain" (Senie 1984: 52; Danto 1987: 90), to some viewers the *Arc* was overbearing and even menacing. Harriet Senie writes: "There was no way to avoid it; one became, willingly or not, a participant (not a spectator) in a city where staying uninvolved was ... the preferred way to negotiate a public space" (2002: xiv). Thomas Hine concludes that *Tilted Arc* was "a great work of art," but the "qualities that gave it its power were precisely those that made it difficult to live with every day" (2001: 41).

Serra's emphasis on site-specificity transformed the act of removal into one of destruction for those critical of the GSA's practices. This claim gains credence in light of several facts. Serra's previous work was well known, and the GSA sought him out for a permanent piece (Serra received verbal assurances confirming this; Buskirk 1991: 43). After exhaustive project evaluation and approving

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detailed plans specifying scale, placement, and material, which included revisions made per the GSA's request, Serra was awarded the contract. The GSA knew what it was getting from Serra; as Robert Hughes snapped: "It did not expect a cute bronze of Peter Pan" (1985: 78). Finally, the GSA had troubled commissions in its recent past, most notably George Sugarman's *Baltimore Federal* (1975–7), which a US District judge described as a "security threat" despite its bright colors, whimsical abstract forms, and provision of seating. Though the A-i-A program was temporarily halted and an internal review conducted (Balfé and Wyszomirski 1987: 24), Sugarman's work remained in place, thanks to a mobilized art community, and the local press and people (Lewis 1977: 40; Thalacker 1980: 8–13; Senie 1992b: 176–7). As proven by the Baltimore case, "understanding is not instant" (Allen 1985: 248), yet the GSA did little to enhance public receptivity toward *Tilted Arc* before its installation. A small scale model of the work that "gave little real notion of the size and impact of the full piece" was placed in the GSA building's lobby, while a pole-and-string stakeout on the plaza offered no "accurate impression of the mass and solidity of the artwork itself" (Balfé and Wyszomirski 1987: 25). The GSA also did little to address resentment toward the work after its installation (Storr 1989: 276), which may have been intensified by poor working conditions at the site (McConathy 1987: 4). Though it can take years for an intended audience to acclimate to an artwork, and for a commissioning agency to evaluate the public's reactions (Grant 1989: 82), the GSA was anxious to cut bait.

The tribulations of *Tilted Arc* made their way to the general press, with publications like *People Weekly* portraying the work as a conspiracy between the federal government and art elite against the "people" (Carlson 1985: 138). But Serra's supporters perceived no such alliance between government and the art world. Instead they saw something insidious in the GSA's actions, believing that *Tilted Arc's* removal was not actually motivated by the will of a deeply offended public, but by political aspirations, especially those of zealous GSA Regional Administrator William Diamond, who entered the scene three years after the work was installed. Since the GSA covers all design, execution, and installation costs, the agency maintains propriety rights over the works it commissions, and retains

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final authority over artwork removal or relocation. Prompted in particular by the complaints of Chief Justice Edward D. Re, Diamond circulated petitions and convened a *Tilted Arc* hearing, claiming to carry out the public's wishes. Diamond presided over the hearing and personally selected a five-member panel to hear testimony, none of whom were experts on public art. The hearing was to determine whether or not *Tilted Arc* should remain in situ – that is, in its original, intended location – or be relocated, though as Robert Storr observes, the hearing seemed little more than “parliamentary niceties” providing “camouflage for a fixed agenda” (1989: 273). While some members of the public decried the piece upon its installation, it remains unclear if they were still as upset by the time of the March 1985 hearing. Only 58 people bothered to testify against *Tilted Arc*, though there were more than 10,000 employees at Federal Plaza then, in addition to any other concerned citizens (Serra 1989: 36–7; Weyergraf-Serra and Buskirk 1991: 23, 57). Two-thirds of those who testified at the hearing, and the majority of those who wrote the GSA in regard to the matter, were in favor of keeping the work in situ (Senie 1989: 299). Yet Diamond's hearing concluded the piece would be removed, although the *Arc* was supposed to remain on the plaza until an alternative location was found. Diamond's detractors maintain he was predisposed against the work and manipulated public opinion and the media, creating what Serra characterized as an “imagined majority,” to have the piece destroyed (1989: 37–8). The possibility of relocation was a moot point. While venues like Storm King Art Center expressed interest in hosting *Tilted Arc* they were unwilling to do so without the artist's consent, and Serra indicated he would disclaim authorship if the piece were installed elsewhere (Weyergraf-Serra and Buskirk 1991: 133). Though Hughes quipped that “the world is full of formerly ‘site-specific’ art,” which has “not died from being moved” (1985: 78), as Nick Kaye perceives site-specific work, to move it is to “*re-place* it, to make it *something else*” (2000: 2).

*Tilted Arc* prompts questions about democracy that extend beyond the impact of the American two-party political system on public art. (It was commissioned under Carter's liberal Democratic administration, while its removal occurred in the wake of Reagan-era conservatism and was led by Diamond, a Republican

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political appointee.) Though Serra, who honed his skills working in steel mills as a young adult, acknowledges that there are situations in which “the people’s needs and my needs could be mutually related,” he disavows populism as “art defeating.” He proclaims that attracting “a bigger audience has nothing to do with the making of art” (Serra qtd. in Senie 1984: 55), and contends that “*Tilted Arc* was never intended to – nor did it – speak for the United States Government” (1989: 43). To protect the work Serra sued in 1986 for violation of his contract, free speech, and due process (McConathy 1987: 14), though his complaint and appeal were subsequently dismissed. When testifying at the 1985 hearing, Victor Ganz, then chair of the Battery Park City fine arts committee, implored the GSA to “have the courage to be elitist enough to be truly democratic” (Ganz qtd. in Howarth 1985: 99). But like Ganz, many of those who spoke in Serra’s favor (as well as the NEA panel members who concluded removal of the *Arc* was tantamount to its destruction), are fairly categorized as art world “insiders.” Were these people truly representative of or concerned for the broader public, or were they answering a call of duty to defend one of their own, attempting to insulate the borders of “high art”? And in his insistence upon a site-specificity that privileged aesthetics, did Serra consider the rights of the public, or only his own? While we may never determine whether it was truly populist forces that removed *Tilted Arc*, or if the people’s voices were actually quieted by powerful vigilante bureaucrats, Thomas Crow finds the GSA’s claims to represent the public rooted in “a decidedly elitist presupposition about what such people can and cannot absorb” (1996: 148–9). Erika Doss concurs, arguing that the GSA appropriated a “populist tone” to skew “the democratic process.” Thus “*Tilted Arc*’s removal had less to do with public autonomy than with GSA sovereignty,” though she notes that it is too easy to blame “the state” or a “cultural elite” as such polarization eclipses the nuances of public life (1995: 33–4). Regardless, the controversy made two things clear: the commissioning and installation processes for *Tilted Arc* were “distinctly flawed” (Balfé and Wyszomirski 1987: 25), and the subsequent removal of public art calls for as much careful consideration as its initial placement.

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Before *Tilted Arc*'s installation, the plaza was not a "little lunchtime oasis" (Carlson 1985: 138), but a fairly inhospitable place with undistinguished architecture and a broken fountain (Crow 1996: 148). As described by Hughes, Federal Plaza was "one of the ugliest public spaces in America" (1985: 78). Immediately after the *Arc*'s removal a gaggle of standard-issue benches and planters were placed there, until the plaza required major structural work and the GSA folded an art initiative into its repairs budget. The agency "unilaterally" selected Martha Schwartz, who in 1997 furnished the space with more standard-issue benches (but this time acid-green ones arranged in serpentine patterns), which snake around mounds of earth (originally covered with grass, but since replanted with shrubs) occasionally spewing steam. On the Broadway side of the plaza now stands Beverly Pepper's *Sentinels* (1996), four abstract columns in that same rusty Cor-Ten steel. As Senie points out, there is more than a little irony here; though one can now sit and ignore the art more easily, there is no direct path across the plaza, which is still a place people rarely linger (2002: 96, 98–100, 102). In fact, both of the new works lack the strong presence of Serra's piece; Schwartz's design is playful in an ordinary way (colors and curves must be fun!), while Pepper's slender, vertical sculptures can escape notice altogether. Serra did not necessarily make Federal Plaza any prettier with *Tilted Arc*, nor did he make the pedestrian's commute any shorter or view any clearer. But he did make the space interesting. One of the most essential services the public artist can provide is to activate a space, which is precisely what Serra did for Federal Plaza, both physically and socially. Crow suggests that given the site's symbolism as a seat of federal authority, and its proximity to downtown art neighborhoods, one could anticipate that *Tilted Arc* would come "under extraordinary scrutiny in both its civic and aesthetic manifestations." But he also insists the plaza is permanently marked by "the shared memory of the trauma of the sculpture's removal" (Crow 1996: 144, 150). *Tilted Arc*'s fate has become the key to its lasting value; unable to stay in its intended home, the dialogue it fosters extends its lifespan in perpetuity. Crow concludes:

Large questions concerning the relations between public symbols and private ambitions, between political freedom, legal obligations

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and aesthetic choice, have been put vividly and productively into play by the work, engendering debates that might have been abstract and idle had it not existed – and which might have been complacently put aside had it gone on existing. (1996: 150)

Among continued hesitations about A-i-A is that it expects art-works like *Tilted Arc* to rehabilitate poorly designed architecture or unwelcoming public spaces and provide amenities, even when artists make no claims to do so. Patricia Phillips suggests that percent-for-art programs often lead to a “minimum basic standard” that ultimately begets mediocrity and thwarts creative potential (1988: 93). But as director of the Arts for Transit program (responsible for placing public art in New York’s subway system), Wendy Feuer questioned the appropriateness of governmental funding for confrontational works. Though Feuer acknowledged the desirability of challenging art experiences, she recognized their increased vulnerability in widely accessible public settings (1989: 139–40, 145, 148, 153). Almost any percent-for-art initiative has the capacity to generate controversy; works are aimed at audiences that might have “no particular interest in art” and placed where one “can’t really avoid them.” Alan Ehrenhalt proposes that such programs fare better when they involve “ordinary people who will be the front-line consumers day in and out.” While he admits such measures could not guarantee “better artistic decisions, or even necessarily different ones,” he asserts there is much to gain in giving the public a voice about matters on its own turf (1994: 9–10). After the *Tilted Arc* debacle, the A-i-A selection process seemed more thoughtful and even tentative, and the GSA made earlier outreach efforts to “local communities which are to be recipients of the art” (Ted Weiss, qtd. in Howarth 1985: 98). Yet we should not encourage the GSA to reduce public art to a “popularity contest.” As Senie reminds us: “Controversy is loud and appreciation often silent and unmeasurable” (1992b: 230). Clearly, matters of taste cannot, and ought not, be legislated. The management of government sponsorship, art world sentiments, and public relations is not a task for the diplomatically challenged.

## **National Endowment for the Arts' Art-in-Public-Places Program**

In 1965 the National Endowment for the Arts was founded under Johnson's administration, marking the first time in American history that substantial federal tax-based funds were allocated for arts spending at the state and local levels (Katz 1984: 28). In doing so the arts were "*officially* sanctioned as significant contributors to our nation's well-being" (Smagula 1983: 13), and "support for culture" was established as "a legitimate government responsibility" (Buchwalter 1992: 1). At its core, NEA policy emphasizes the dissemination of and access to art experiences regardless of any perceived social barriers, and the agency of culture's receivers; providing the individual with an opportunity to make an "educated choice" about having "high quality" art in one's life. Thus the Endowment often finds itself straddling expectations for high culture and hopes for populist appeal (Wyszomirski 1982: 13–14; Arian 1989: 5–6), in an effort to provide "quality" art for "everybody." To that end the NEA established its Art-in-Public-Places (A-i-P-P) program in 1967, which intended to reach the widest possible audiences by responding to local requests. Its official aims included: increasing awareness of contemporary art; fostering aesthetic enhancement and socially minded redevelopment of public spaces; offering American artists, especially emerging ones, opportunities to work in public contexts; supporting artistic experimentation; and engendering direct community involvement in the commission and placement of art. According to Brian O'Doherty, a former director of the NEA's Visual Arts Programs, A-i-P-P signaled "a crucial change in perspective which removed the idea of the Federal Government imposing art works on communities that had no option but to accept or reject them" (1974: 44).

In John Beardsley's estimation, A-i-P-P was one of the government's most visible and at moments, controversial, art programs. Instead of explicating definitive standards by which to judge the qualitative merits of art, A-i-P-P adopted a self-consciously democratic process open to scrutiny and debate, and courted audiences

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not necessarily predisposed to art appreciation (1981a: 9). While this program is the most egalitarian in spirit of those discussed in this chapter, its moniker, “art in public places,” is a semantic gambit. It does not focus upon the content, audiences, or processes by which art might become public, but rather the physical places where such art is sited; “artworks purchased or commissioned for publicly owned or publicly accessible spaces. It is art made public, outside the home or museum” (Beardsley 1981b: 43; Allen 1985: 246). While definitions of “public place” are mutable, it seems easier to arrive at some agreement over these than to concur about what constitutes “public art.” As Jerry Allen observed, the terms “public” and “art” are inherently contradictory. To modernist sensibilities, art was “individual inquiry” rather than actions on behalf of a collective body, marking a tension that estranged “the public for whose benefit the artwork” was placed (1985: 246). A-i-P-P labored to counter this rift with proactive community initiatives that would develop public space as “a symbol of a neighborhood’s vitality and character,” instead of “an emblem of its disorganization and poverty of spirit” (Schwartz 2000: 13). To do so, A-i-P-P encouraged citizens to take responsibility for and ownership of such spaces, including raising financial resources. A-i-P-P did not solicit grant applicants but provided matching federal funds to support community-sponsored projects, which originated from ad-hoc groups, cultural organizations, nonprofits, and local governmental or art agencies. Thus projects were financed through mixes of municipal, corporate, federal, and private sources. While this matrix of involved parties sparked rich dialogue and emphasized shared goals, it also underscored the pluralism of American society. With so many interests and values represented, an A-i-P-P project offered no single expected outcome.

In 1966 the National Council for the Arts pilot-tested the idea for A-i-P-P; by 1967 the program’s initial grants were made under the leadership of Henry Geldzahler, the NEA’s Visual Arts Programs’ inaugural director. The first A-i-P-P work, *La Grande Vitesse*, an immense, bright red steel sculpture by Alexander Calder, then one of America’s preeminent living artists, was placed in Grand Rapids, Michigan (commissioned 1967, installed 1969). Initially decried mostly because of its abstraction, *La Grande Vitesse* eventually

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became “a cultural sign of a decidedly upscale urban identity,” a “civic logo” that appeared on everything from the city’s letterhead to its garbage trucks (Senie 1992b: 219). The sculpture ushered in a wave of art enthusiasm in the community; although it may not have suited everyone’s taste, the citizens of Grand Rapids (a city not previously known for its art) were proud to have a major artwork by an important artist in their hometown. At this early stage, A-i-P-P’s goals were fairly modest: find an eminent artist whose work could “provide a commanding focus point” for a substantial plaza (Beardsley 1981a: 16–17). There was little concern for context, message, or site-specificity. Yet as Senie posits, this first commission was instructive; *La Grande Vitesse* was not a substitute for urban renewal, but part of a larger initiative toward such (1992b: 219). Seattle received the second A-i-P-P grant for Isamu Noguchi’s *Black Sun* (installed 1969), a 9-foot-tall circle of black granite, pierced in the middle and covered with irregularly shaped outcroppings. Seattle quickly embraced art as a vital component of its comprehensive revitalization efforts. The city established a standing A-i-P-P committee, brought artists in at planning stages, and composed juries of art professionals and community members to select its public artworks (Beardsley 1981a: 20–3; Allen 1985: 244–5).

With time, the nature of A-i-P-P shifted toward greater public involvement; instead of focusing on masterworks by famous artists, it took a “chat them up” approach to the community (Raven 1989: 11, 15). By 1973 the program had formalized guidelines, but it was the 1979 revision of operations that greatly enhanced community accountability for the projects. While the NEA continued to provide assistance for proposals and grant applications, it abolished its joint panel system. This effectively removed the NEA from artist selections, requiring communities to develop their own criteria and procedures. An interested party, following NEA guidelines, had to initiate and carry through a commission: selecting the artist and site; raising matching funds; building support from local officials and neighborhood members; and ultimately assuming responsibility for the artwork’s installation and maintenance. The NEA does not own the art, its sponsoring community or organization does. Although Judith Balfe and Margaret Wyszomirski feel A-i-P-P shared a primarily aesthetic purpose with A-i-A (1987: 22–3),

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I suggest that A-i-P-P's efforts were characterized by a more distinctly pronounced social dimension, emphasizing public inclusion from the program's start. A-i-P-P's approach was essential in fostering acceptance of its artworks. The projects often incorporated content relevant to their local audiences rather than addressing generalized ones, frequently offered utilitarian or rehabilitative functions, and relied upon sustained commitments from the public. Thus there was a notable distinction between A-i-A, which is federally sponsored but offers limited opportunities for public involvement, and A-i-P-P, which provided partial government funding but depended on extensive community participation (Beardsley 1981a: 9–13; 1981b: 44–5).

The egalitarian idealism underlying A-i-P-P's precepts is not without its challenges. For example, Miami Dade County, frequently cited as one of the most successful municipal offshoots of the NEA's A-i-P-P, still had its share of troubles. Miami Dade instituted its own A-i-P-P program in 1973, earmarking a percent and a half of construction funds for art commissions. In its heyday the Miami Dade program boasted an array of educational and outreach initiatives, and commissioned high-profile artists who executed works that garnered critical and public praise. Yet the program had difficulty sustaining support from local politicians and officials. The aura of "civic pride" that had ushered it in waned with the County's economic woes in the 1980s. Collection of mandated funds and utilization of potential sites were hampered by various parties, reminding us that the County is comprised of multiple publics, all of whom are not necessarily in sympathy with A-i-P-P objectives. If this "first public" of bureaucrats and contractors cannot be won over, the art never gains broader audiences (Joselit 1990: 142–51, 183). Without securing steady sources of political and financial capital, the livelihood of any art program is, at best, vulnerable.

Today the NEA's A-i-P-P program no longer exists, and the health of the Endowment is tenuous. The NEA was battered in the late 1980s and 1990s by neoconservative forces that gained steam in the Reagan era (the President suggested eliminating both the NEA and National Endowment for the Humanities altogether; Dubin 1992: 281). Led by Senator Jesse Helms, who proposed a ban on "obscene and indecent art," right-wingers made dramatic

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incursions on the vision and funding of the NEA, adopting a “pseudopopulist stance,” which ironically purported to preserve public culture by exercising tighter control over it (Doss 1995: 27–8). Though efforts to abolish the NEA were unsuccessful and the Endowment was reauthorized in 1997, it is a shadow of its formerly robust self. The Endowment no longer awards grants to individual artists in most cases, and Congress can intervene more directly in the NEA’s selection of artists and distribution of monies. And of course, the NEA remains under the federal government’s control; its director is a presidential appointee, and its continued funding is dependent upon Congress. Though George Yudice acknowledges conservatism’s corrosive effect on the NEA, he suggests that the Endowment’s gradual erosion is indicative of the government’s withdrawal from arts patronage in general. This is coupled with an increased emphasis on the “utility and relevance” of the arts, which are expected to serve civic, social, and educational ends that justify their support, rather than a “humanistic tenet” that provides “uplift, a safe haven for freedom or inner vision.” Yet the NEA has made an enduring mark on the landscape of American public art. By 1980 all 50 states had their own arts agencies, a proliferation likely stimulated by the NEA and its former chair, Nancy Hanks, as only four states had such agencies before 1965 (Yudice 1999: 18, 20, 25–7, 29).

In 1991 the NEA proposed to combine the A-i-P-P and Visual Artists Forums funding categories; by 1993 these were indeed merged. The last proposals that received A-I-P-P grants often emphasized “social problems and multiculturalism,” and “the social situation of a site” (Senie 2002: 108). Today “public art” proposals to the NEA are channeled to its Grants for Arts Projects categories: usually Access to Artistic Excellence, which seeks to “provide access to the arts for all Americans”; or Challenge America: Reaching Every Community Fast-Track Review, which offers smaller grants more quickly to “underserved populations.” (Education-based grants are available through the Learning in the Arts for Children and Youth program; arts.endow.gov 2007.) One wonders if these programs can sustain initiative and collaboration at the community level, and represent the complex multiplicity of any given population, as A-i-P-P had tried to do. A-i-P-P was far from perfect, but it prompted local communities to claim their own spaces and excavate their own histories

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in order to “define and redefine themselves” (Breitbart and Worden 1993: 27–8). Will the next generation of NEA programs knit neighborhoods together in shared visions for their futures? Or will they proffer simplified solutions to society’s ills that alienate members of the public? Ultimately, what will be best served: a federal agenda, art world interests, or the communities who live with the art?

A problematic that unifies the New Deal, Art-in-Architecture, and Art-in-Public Places programs is that their understandings of “public art” were frequently predicated upon physical accessibility. If art was in a space to which the audience gained entry without paying a fee (or if that fee was paid to utilize infrastructure or transportation services, not to view art), it was “public.” But such a reductive definition negates the truly public aspects of art; its ability to stimulate the intellects, senses, and emotions of viewers regardless of location. When Phillips contends “the public dimension is a psychological, rather than a physical or environmental construct” (1988: 93), she recognizes that art for “the people” must not necessarily be set in their daily paths, but needs to engage their hearts, incite their minds, and risk some discontent along the way. It is this last point that underscores the great shortcoming of much government-sponsored public art: the desire to propagate good will and nurture consensus has cultivated an aesthetics of the bland. Unlikely to offend many viewers, the most probable peril of such art is that of boring its audience. Even the earliest public artworks commissioned by our government had the potential for controversy. Horatio Greenough’s colossal portrait of *George Washington* (1832–41) was met with disdain; some viewers found the President clothed in a Roman toga too undignified and revealing (Mankin 1982: 116–17). But to elevate official sponsorship above the level of “dull interior design bought from a tax-deductible art budget” (Miles 1989: 7), the government must welcome the discord that likely comes with art patronage (Levitt 1991: 20). Erika Doss rightly insists that controversy is “healthy and hopeful,” maintaining that “fierce debate” about public art “is a sign that Americans still hold out for the possibilities of culture democracy” (1995: vii–viii, 14–15).

Writing in the midst of the *Tilted Arc* controversy, Peter Blake bemoaned the quality of art created through “universal suffrage” in

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which theoretically “every taxpayer has the right to vote on its form, content, site, and the selection of its creator” (1987: 286). Likewise, artist Robert Morris lamented “populist” government art policies, which appease the “middle-brow” with “mediocre” art, diffuse “concentrated culture,” deflate the avant-garde, and seize upon the entertainment value of art (1992: 251). It is true that a good deal of substandard art has been produced and placed through the patronage of our government, but there has also been work of great substance that interrogates established aesthetic and social ideals. Morris too lightly dismissed the transformative power of being entertained; the avant-garde is not so fragile as to be threatened by some levity, and providing amusement and enjoyment are meaningful goals. Inviting more people to engage in public art processes will require tactful negotiation, and at times acquiescence, but such concessions could be worthwhile if formerly disenfranchised individuals gain personal stakes in the arts. Although short-lived, the Artist Project of the Comprehensive Employment Training Act (CETA) was a government-sponsored arts program that was populist both in intent and in approach. Begun under the Carter administration, the Artist Project enabled thousands of American artists to offer free performances, teach classes, and make public art, usually in “close communication and ... collaboration with grassroots community groups,” thus forging a dialogue “between artists ... and nonartists, who very likely had never had contact with artists in any capacity before” (Maksymowicz 1990: 149–50). We cannot overlook the shared legacy of the New Deal, A-i-A, and A-i-P-P, each of which made claims for the *social* functions of art. Not relegated solely to self-reflexive aesthetic concerns, artworks increasingly reflected cultural values, responded to political issues, and directly engaged their audiences in critical dialogues of the day. By the end of the twentieth century social context could not be ignored in the practices of public art. A greater recognition of and appreciation for the forces of populism had finally arrived.