

Moderating Panel Discussion on  
Role and Responsibility of Government in Displaying Public Art

VizArts Museum  
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Julian Spirer

Introduction

My name is Julian Spirer. I will be moderating the panel discussion this evening.

Let me thank all of you for coming to what should be a stimulating investigation of a challenging and timely subject.

By way of background, Judy Taylor, a painter of bucolic nature and domestic scenes, has found herself cast in the spotlight after Paul LePage, Maine's Republican governor, ordered that her 2008 mural depicting the state's labor history, a copy of which is arrayed around you, be removed from the waiting room of Maine's Department of Labor building. (The Governor said the mural favored labor interests at the expense of business interests.) A federal lawsuit has been filed to return the mural to the building. We are here to discuss the issues raised by this controversy, notably the role and responsibility of government in displaying public art.

Thanks

Before immersing ourselves in the relationship between government and art, let me extend a few words of thanks.

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Special thanks go to the \_\_\_\_\_ executive director of Visarts of Rockville, our host,

and the curator of this show, the indefatigable Nancy Nesvet

Let me also introduce Visarts. VisArts at Rockville is a dynamic, nonprofit arts center dedicated to engaging the community in the arts and providing opportunities for artistic exploration, education and participation. Through educational programming, gallery exhibitions and a resident artist program, VisArts provides children, teens and adults with opportunities to express their creativity and enhance their awareness of the arts.

A large-scale reproduction of the Judy Taylor mural, preliminary drawings, labor paintings and supporting work are on view here from August 30th through September 20th. The show also features a large-scale reproduction of Michael Spafford's Twelve Labors of Hercules the removal of which from the Washington State House of Representatives chamber also aroused heated controversy.

### Introductions of Our Impressive Group of Panelists

**Penny S. Harris** is a certified fundraiser who currently serves on the board of Portland Arts and Cultural Alliance. She is a former president of the League of Women Voters of Maine and treasurer of the League of Women Voters of the United States. She is a trustee of the University of Maine System and of the Center for Maine Contemporary Art.

**Susie Leong** is the program director for public art at the Maryland State Arts Council. Prior to that, she served as the director of the Public Arts Trust, Montgomery County's public art program. While at Harvard's Graduate School of Design, she wrote a thesis on the debates around public art and how they can inform public art policies. She received her BA in Art from Yale University and MFA from the University of Michigan.

**Joe McCartin** is Associate Professor of History at Georgetown University and Executive Director of the Kalmanovitz Initiative for Labor and the Working Poor. He is a historian of the U.S. labor movement, and 20th century U.S. social and political history. His most recent book, [\*Collision Course: Ronald Reagan, the Air Traffic Controllers, and the Strike that Changed America\*](#), explores the most consequential labor conflict of the past half century, the 1981 PATCO strike.

**Robert Shetterly** graduated in 1969 from Harvard College with a degree in English Literature. At Harvard he took a couple of courses in drawing which changed the direction of his life. His paintings & prints are in collections all over the U.S. and Europe. For the past nine 1/2 years he has been painting the series of portraits (numbering now 170) called Americans Who Tell the Truth. Since 1990, he has been the President of the Union of Maine Visual Artists (UMVA).

**Don Tuski**, is the President of the Maine College of Art. He built his academic career at Olivet College where he started as a faculty member before becoming president for his last 9 years at the college.

### Format

I also wish to set out the proposed format. We will try first to have a rather free floating discussion here of the important issues regarding public art raised by the decision of Governor LePage to take down the lovely panels that are represented around this room. After about 30 minutes of intrapanel discussion, we will open the floor for questions to the panelists by all of you for another 30 minutes.

### Questions

As an introduction to our topic, nothing could be more fitting than an account of the fate of the very first public artwork commissioned by the US government. It was a 12-ton marble sculpture of a bare-chested George Washington sitting on a classical throne and lifting his right hand in an imperial gesture toward the heavens. Horatio Greenough was paid in 1832 the princely sum of \$44,000 to create a work to commemorate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Washington's birth. The statue was to reside forever in the US Capitol Rotunda. From the moment of display during a time of Jacksonian populism, the wigged and semiclothed statue generated outrage and ridicule. The standard joke was that in lifting his hand upward, Washington was desperately reaching for his clothes. Within two years, the statue had been moved outside to the Capitol grounds. In 1908, the statue finished its journey from work of art to historical curiosity when it was consigned to the National Museum of American History where it may yet be seen today.

I am also reminded of a story of one patron and a famous artist:

A wealthy man commissioned Pablo Picasso to paint a portrait of his wife. Startled by the non-representational image on the final canvas, the husband complained, "It isn't how she really looks." When asked by the painter how she really looked, the man produced a photograph from his wallet. Returning the photography, Picasso observed in a comment on all efforts at representation, "Small, isn't she?"

### Basic Question—What is public art

Clearly, from George Washington to the history of labor in Maine, the issue of the proper relationship between public art and the government is still with us and begs further debate.

Well panel, let us start with the most fundamental question,

What is public art and should it exist?

New York Times columnist William Safire has written that "The Federal Government should get out of the arts business because direct Federal support ultimately conflicts with freedom of expression?" On the other hand, more than 350 state and local governments have public art programs. Who is right?

Blue Springs, MO, provides the following broad explanation as a guide: Public art is artwork in the public realm, regardless of whether it is situated on public or private property, or whether it is acquired through public or private funding. Public art can be a sculpture, mural, manhole cover, paving pattern, lighting, seating, building facade, kiosk, gate, fountain, play equipment, engraving, carving, fresco, mobile, collage, mosaic, bas-relief, tapestry, photograph, drawing, or earthwork. Blue Springs Public Art Commission Program Definitions

What role or roles do you feel public art can play?

Educational: The Senate report accompanying the law that created the National Endowment for the Arts stressed the role of art as a "mirror of self-examination...so that society can become aware of its shortcomings as well as its strengths."

Political: I don't think artists can avoid being political. Artists are the proverbial canaries in the coalmine. When we stop singing, it's a sure sign of repressive times ahead. (Theresa Bayer) ; There is in fact no such thing as art for art's sake, art that stands above classes, art that is detached from or independent of politics. Proletarian literature and art are part of the whole proletarian revolutionary cause. Mao Zedong

Economic: Keeping artists employed.

Celebratory: War memorials, Judy Taylor murals;

### Interests and Constituencies Affected by Public Art

What are the various interests and constituencies in the public art debate?

Artists: Do they have to approach art commissioned by a government differently from art commissioned by a private patron

Public: Does it make a difference where a work of art is slated for display?

Workers: Should the government employees who have to work around a site have a voice in what art gets displayed? In one famous controversy, a massive sculpture entitled Tilted Arc was removed from the plaza in front of the Jacob Javits Office

Bldg in New York due largely to complaints from workers who felt it impeded their ingress and egress from the building.

### Commissioning Public Art

Who should determine what art should be commissioned? Should there be a role for elected officials? For bureaucrats?

When the National Endowment for the Arts was created, there was concern about leaving funding decisions in the hands of “liberal NEA staff members.”

What role should artists and art professionals play?

Should there be a role for members of the public?

Thornton Wilder objected to public support of the arts. He said, “Government should not subsidize a national theater because the voters would then become critics with the power of censorship at the polls.” Is that true of the visual arts as well?

Should we establish a clear budget for public art?

GSA reserves one-half of one percent of the estimated construction cost of each new federal building to commission project artists. A panel composed of art professionals, civic and community representatives, the project’s lead design architect, and GSA staff meets to discuss opportunities for artists to participate in the building project. This panel reviews a diverse pool of artist candidates and nominates finalists for GSA to evaluate.

### Decommissioning of Public Art

Should art ever be decommissioned or deaccessioned? Does there come a time when a public work of art no longer serves its original role or roles and needs to be withdrawn from public view? When does that time come and who makes the decision?

Oscar Wilde said that “Beauty is the only thing that time cannot harm.”

### Lessons from the Past: The Works Project Administration and CETA

Before we reach the controversy that brings us here together, maybe we should get a bit of an historical perspective? Are there any lessons to be learned about the display of public art, say, from the Federal Arts Project of the depression?

The Federal Arts Project from 1935 to 1943 created over 5,000 jobs for artists and was responsible for the creation of over 225,000 works of art.

The New Deal employed such artists as Jackson Pollock, Isamu Noguchi, Reginald Marsh, Ben Shahn, the Soyer brothers, and Stuart Davis and was responsible for the creation of 200 murals in New York City itself? (Ask Georgetown professor)

From 1977 to 1982, in New York City, over 350 artists were given jobs doing their art in the community while being paid by the Federal Government -- the largest Federally-funded artists' project since the WPA. With funds from CETA, the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act which began in 1973 and whose mission was to train those who were unemployed or low-income workers and issue them jobs in the public service, with the hope that they could then swim into the economy at large. The CETA Artists' Project under the Cultural Council Foundation employed artists in the city of New York, introducing their efforts and talent into New York communities.

Is there a distinction between employing artists in order to give them a livelihood or to help to revive an economy as opposed to employing them to make use of their creative talents?

When government does employ artists for their creative abilities, should it be concerned about the possible message of the works that they will create?

Should we be concerned that, when the black artist Charles Alston and other muralists who did work for the Harlem Hospital, included themes of interests to blacks, hospital officials blocked installation of the works on the grounds that such material served special interests? (Only when supporters, including art project administrators, pushed for an impartial commission of inquiry, did the hospital administration back down.)

Another example: Ben Shahn and his wife Bernarda Bryson, were forced by Post Office officials to alter their mural of Walt Whitman for a post office in the Bronx, so that the words of Whitman addressed to a group of workers were less inflammatory than those originally inscribed.

A further example from the mid-50's. The vast (12 feet by 337 feet) circular word "Flight" completed by James Brooks in 1942 for the rotunda of the Marine Art Terminal at La Guardia airport was whited-out when the Port Authority took over the terminal from New York City. Even though the artist apparently intended no political allusions, left wing symbolism was suspected in some of the images.

One aroused citizen even wondered why so many of the figures in the work were left-handed.)

### The Taylor Murals and the Role of Governor LePage

Leaving aside the legality of what Governor LePage did in having the Taylor murals removed from the walls of the waiting room of Maine Department of Labor, was his action defensible? Did it represent good or bad government?

Would it make a difference if he considered the Taylor murals to be objectionable as art, as history, or as politics?

If he considered the works to be execrable, how if at all should he have gone about having the panels considered for removal?

Assuming the current court case sustains his right to have the works removed,, is there an obligation to have them displayed somewhere else (ask the director of the Maine art museum)?

If he prevails, what should he do with the vacant space? Should he leave the walls blank, fill them with works that celebrate the history of business, mount tired copies of the works of old masters?

### Public Arts Policy

Should we have a public arts policy? Should we, for example, be creating a Ministry of Culture, such as exists in almost all European countries? At bottom, should we be concerned that a public arts policy might lead to the development of an official art with all of its totalitarian connotations?

Good taste is the enemy of creativity. Pablo Picasso

Stalin read the galley proofs of Gorky's novels and telephoned him with suggested changes. Napoleon changed the name of the Louvre to Musee Napoleon.