

... an Issue to "C" Guest Editor Phil Simkin

art journal

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The Big PUBLIC ART COMBO

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I've been pursuing the profession of an artist in my own nonlinear fashion for twenty-some years now. Perhaps because I haven't attained the proverbial art world gold ring, which would keep me busy making art to satisfy demand, I spend more time on the convoluted task of trying to understand why it is I keep making art. I am sure I am not alone. My search has been driven by the attempt to



Carolyn Law, *The Most Basic*, 1993, photograph on fabric, acrylic on glasses, photocopy, lighting, window installation, each 5 x 5 feet. Seattle WA.

understand the fundamentals of creativity as well as its significance for the artist and for others.

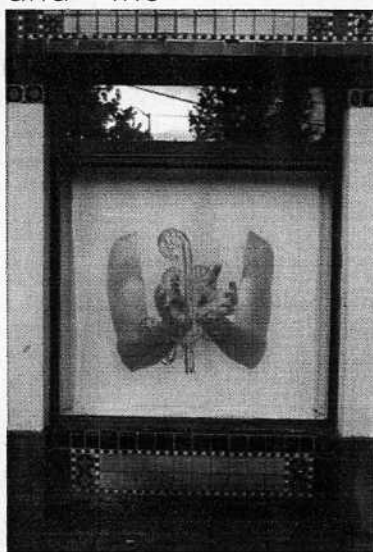
Where has my search led me? Beyond the typical art world assessments of "successful" and "valid," which reside too heavily in the art world, I have found that art and the creative process, above all, should have a genuine relevance not only to a viewer but to a community as a whole. It is of no surprise then that early on in my career I was drawn to public art, and over time I have come to learn that this arena has the potential to reveal more about the nature, both intellectual and emotional, of the creative process than what I had previously thought. The ideal goal for a public art project, I believe, should be a broad and meaningful exchange between the artist and the community. This can best be accomplished by creating work that weaves together people's interpretation and understanding of their lives

and place with the thoughts of the artist. To reveal something essential about a community through an artwork, however, demands more than a reflection on some aspect of its local history; I expect the artwork to bring about change and the artist to communicate new ways of thinking. An artist then cannot lay sole claim to creativity, for it is essential in these times to make public art projects more meaningful by having members of the community be active participants in the creative thought process itself. Only through a process that is wholly involving and challenging can the public art project act as a catalyst for transformation on other fronts.

Unfortunately, it seems that the current *modus operandi* in most of the public art world still involves minimal interaction; a mere bone is thrown into the community to calm the savage beast of public response and to appease bureaucracy. Interaction between artist and community that stays within the realm of influential people only or does not go beyond general information meetings, however, is superficial. It is time to remove the mythical cloak of the individual artist and throw it on the ground for everyone to sit on. I am referring to the development of an ethical and philosophical foundation in the field of public art, which would lead an artist to approach the conceptual and practical development of the public art ideas in a different way.

The most common relationship between the artist and the community exists now with children through artist residencies in schools, education programs at museums, and the like. Yet we know in our culture that most people stop creating in the visual realm once barely out of childhood. Still we have extremely limited opportunities for artists to interact with families, adults, or the work-a-day world. Public art projects can bring artists and art, as real things, into a broad community.

Childhood memories of making art help me to better understand my perspective on the importance of art. I remember clearly feeling a sense of power and wonder in drawing a dog's head, making a ceramic leaf dish, and drawing a nonexistent sister into my family portrait in kindergarten. Interpreting surroundings in different ways galvanizes connections to the world. Art making as a child is not an isolated endeavor but



The Most Basic, detail, first window

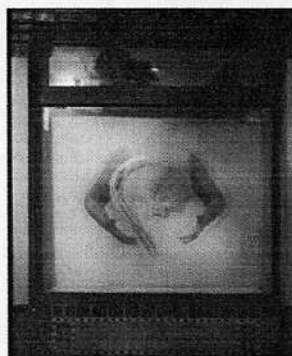
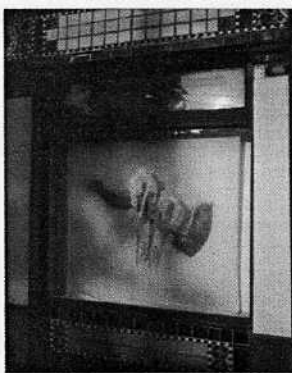
grounded in a group setting, within the routine of daily living, and is imbued with a sense of normalcy. In retrospect, this early understanding of art as a descriptor of the world and as group activity has led me, as an adult, toward art making in a non-isolated situation.

Being a parent has perhaps affected my view of art making most of all. I feel potently linked to a larger view of humanity and the human condition. It is even more difficult to disconnect art making from the world because it has such power. Ideas people have that show up in an artwork somehow can be as powerful as creating something themselves. For example, my youngest son has given me ideas to use in my work. Sometimes we talk about his contributions before I use them. Sometimes I surprise him. His enthusiasm never seems to ebb. Without this connection he would just be an observer. By bringing something of himself into the artwork he becomes more than an observer. His participation in the artwork gives him a sense of accomplishment and an emotional and intellectual attachment to the artwork; where it is, what it means, how others perceive it, etc. I feel that this kind of participation could be meaningful for people of all ages.

My thinking has also been informed by my involvement with the Seattle Design Commission, a group of professionals appointed by the mayor to review design and urban-planning projects that use capital funds and city policy affecting the physical environment of the city. Many of the projects had the potential to enhance the aesthetics of the city's physical environment and respond creatively to the mix of issues that affect the quality and vitality of urban life.

I saw how various city agencies and design firms handled the citizen review, which is a very extensive process in Seattle. The interaction was carefully orchestrated but rarely involved finding better methods to create a more inclusive process; it was more a question of calming the community beast. There are crucial distinctions between these large-scale design and planning projects and public art projects. The scale of the art projects is more intimate, opportunities exist for the artist to be inventive in achieving the goal of interaction with the community, and the artist is not constrained by entrenched thinking and cumbersome bureaucracy.

Most recently I spent four years as a



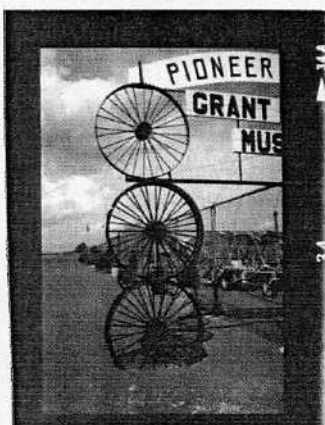
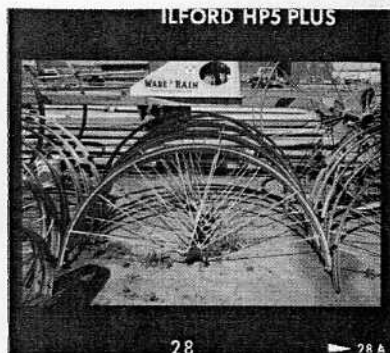
The Most Basic, detail, three windows

project manager for first the Washington State Arts Commission and then the King County Arts Commission (the county Seattle is in). I took on this work because I was interested in seeing what an artist like myself might do different from an arts administrator or bureaucrat. Working for these arts commissions gave me one of the most important experiences I have had as a professional artist. I had the unprecedented opportunity to view two worlds at the same time—that of the artist and that of the “lay person.” I engaged in hours of conversation with various groups all over the state of Washington about their public art projects. We talked about the nuts and bolts of the arts commission process. We talked more than is normal about what public art was, is, and could possibly be. Yet the flow of ideas stopped when the artist entered the picture, because typically she or he held center stage. What I hoped would happen in each case was that an interaction with the community would run parallel to the artist's interaction with the site, and eventually the two would mesh. I also hoped that, through the artist's genuine attempts at interacting with the community, a chain reaction would occur that would have a life of its own and that would surround the completed artwork. At this point I had begun to think that if artists

wanted to be “visionaries,” they should gather in the flock.

As I continued thinking about possibilities for public art, I tried them out. I set up a project involving five community colleges in the Seattle area. For the project each artist had an initial two-week residency at one of the schools but was not expected to come up with a resulting proposal. I hoped that this “free” period would establish a rapport between the artist and the community. I encouraged the five commissioned artists to talk among themselves about their experiences. I had high hopes for the full flowering of artistic and personal curiosity about people and place.

Of course each project had a different outcome. While two of the artists took full advantage of this open-ended residency time, the others did not. What was needed? More time, different artists, a clearly spelled-out to-do list or something that I hadn't hit upon yet? I kept being surprised, yet I shouldn't have been. The skills and approaches I am talking about are not currently taught at most art colleges and institutions. Most artists go



Law's children at Columbia River gorge, 1993 (upper left). Ephrata, Washington: a paper birch tree (lower left), irrigation equipment (lower right), and a wheel rim sign (upper right).

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through these institutions. Yet the field of public art is growing. And the benefits of public art should be expanded beyond employment for artists.

During my tenure at the state arts commission, the projects that were most easily completed tended to be those in which the artist created site-specific artwork that responded to the location in a minimal way or where the art was representative past work.

Another experience that had considerable impact on me during this period was attending the annual state-sponsored Small Town Institute conference, which is designed to give small towns the tools for combating economic downturn so prevalent today by emphasizing what is unique to each of the towns. For the 1988 conference, art was being discussed for the first time and I was asked to speak. To my embarrassment, my first talk, while well meaning, was laced with the snobishness of the art world and was therefore mostly irrelevant. I tried a different approach for the next talk and walked away with thoughts that have colored my thinking about the field of public art since.

During the conference I was bowled over by a husband-and-wife team of planners that worked primarily with towns that were trying to save what was essential to maintain their way of life. The two described their methods of dealing directly with the townspeople using techniques that fostered more than superficial community involvement and got to the heart of the place and the issues. The process

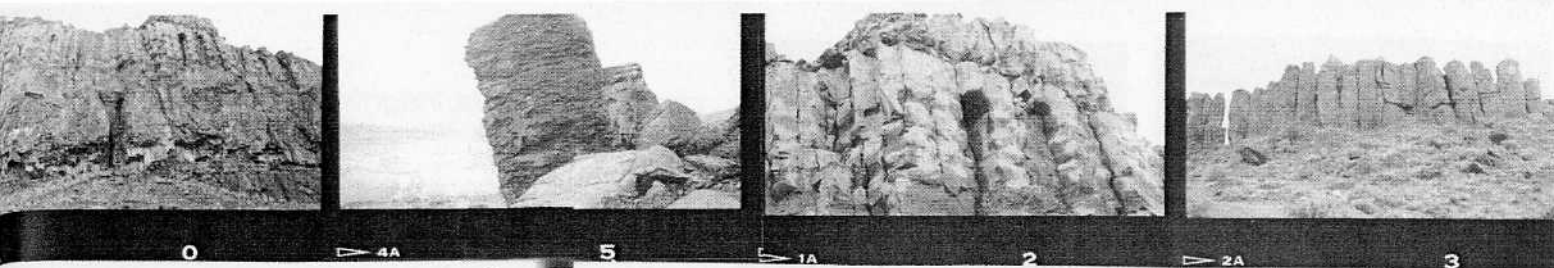
drew out thought, insights, and stories, then knit the people, the place, and the solutions together.

Not long after this experience, I took on another art-project management job for the King County Arts Commission. This project involved the county public medical center, Harborview, which is a place supported by every person in the region because it provides a regional trauma and burn center, emergency services, and basic health care for low-income people. This was a public art project that was emotionally and conceptually huge. It had the potential to connect artists with a diverse community. The group of members already involved had defined a worthy philosophy and goals for art in the medical center. As I began work at Harborview I realized just how exceptional the place was. The staff was absolutely open to working with artists to create a monumental change in the physical environment, which would in turn change the emotional environment. We set up the project so the first three artists involved would merely look, listen, and talk with the community without creating proposals. I expected the artists to have some astute observations to add to the insights of the initial group and to share them with the hospital community.

While this project was closer than any other in reaching my goal for what a public art project might be, it was still not as successful as I had imagined. I realized, though, that I was closer to understanding just what was possible by spending a huge amount of time at the institution and with its people. For projects such as these there is no substitute for time. Also the artist must be free of a narrow conceptual agenda and must have an ability and sincere interest in operating outside the parameters of the art world. More importantly, the Harborview project revealed how potent it is when an artist connects to a place or site for very personal reasons. Each artist had a deep desire to give something to this hospital because they had developed a personal attachment to it. These artists will not forget their experience, and in some way, their subsequent work will be affected.

Two years into Harborview, bitter bureaucratic struggles ensued within county government and the project appeared sadly stalemated. The bureaucratic process was a beast that I was not able to overcome. I decided to stop working in the administrative side of public art. I realized that I would be able to do more as the artist, by taking on the challenges directly.

I was initiating my own public/community projects when I received a prospectus from the small town of Ephrata, in eastern Washington. The project seemed to be open-ended with a distinct emphasis on working



View of basalt rocks, Columbia River Basin, Washington.

with members of the community. The part of the prospectus that was most interesting to me read:

The foremost objective of the Ephrata Public Art Project is to transform Ephrata into a place of human interest and creativity. (The artwork) should add inspiration and delight to the community of Ephrata and the tourist traveling through. (The artwork will) communicate ... a sense of the value of our historic past, present vitality and future potential.

To make a long story short, I applied and was chosen as the artist. Ephrata turned out to be a town of five thousand situated in the geographic middle of the state at the southern end of that geologic wonder, the Grand Coulee. I was to design artworks that would mark the three entrances/exits to town and also work on a design for a town-center park as well as discuss other types of art projects that the townspeople could initiate themselves and that would continue to add depth to the town. Now I was faced with setting in motion the very process of interaction that I had been theorizing about for so long.

Even though Ephrata was a stiff commute from Seattle, I went there more times than I care to mention. I spent time with people of all ages doing all sorts of things. I sat down with kids in school, amateur painting groups, senior women having a weekly get-together, and so on. I drove down all the business and residential streets to see what the aesthetics of the town were, taking pictures of the things that caught my eye. I showed the photographs to a number of townspeople and had interesting discussions with them, as I learned that most people don't notice that much around them. My progress was tracked by the three papers that are tied to the town (so many because it is the county seat). I was right up there with what happened in court or at city council meetings. People recognized me from my picture in the papers and approached me to talk about the project.

In talking I asked people what they noticed or thought about when they looked around at the city and the land, what they felt about and did in places, and what and

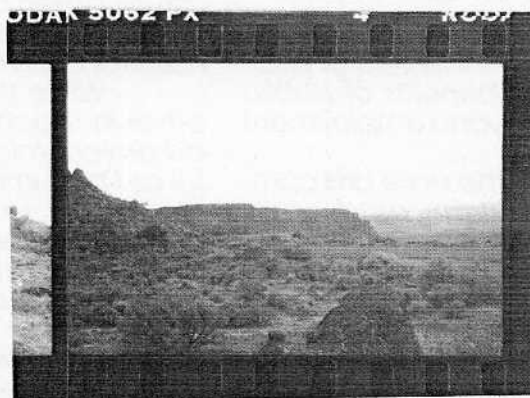
where was the beauty of the place to them. I asked anything I could think of that would give me insight into what the town and surroundings meant to the local people and that would stimulate them to think about their place in new ways. I went places people told me were special to them. I read books that people recommended about the beginnings of the town and the original spirit of the place and how it had changed through the efforts of the current citizenry. I digested everything and turned it over in my mind on the long drives back and forth through the incredible countryside. My approach worked to the degree that the longer I was there doing something with the people, the more the essence of the place drifted to the surface. I realize even today that I didn't do exactly what I thought I would, but I think I got close, through the mishmash of

things I did do, to understanding what it is about Ephrata that is essential to the people of the town.

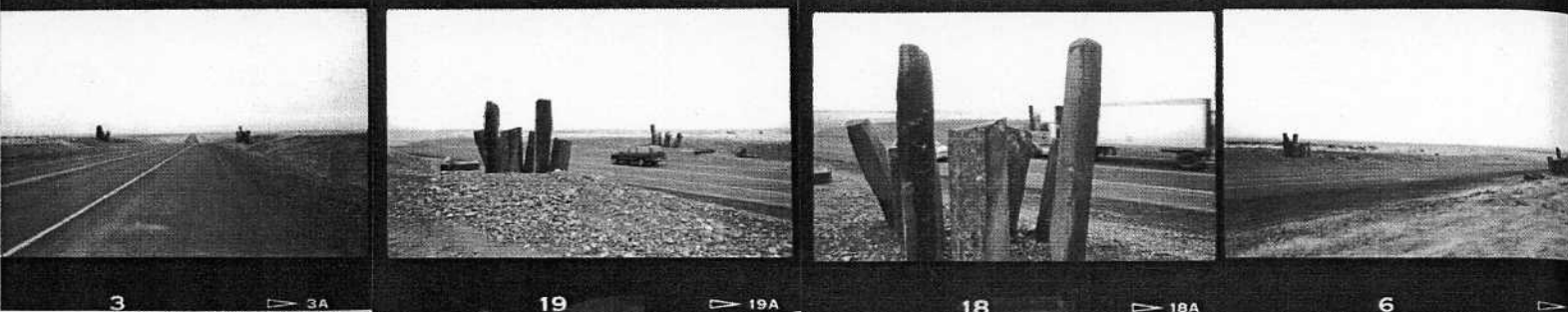
In terms of public art I had discovered at least part of the ticket—listen hard and think about the things that people say and go beyond that by holding a mirror up to them and sharing your own reflections; follow your nose in listening and observing

and do not let people off the hook when you ask questions and they respond, "You're the artist."

So as not to leave my reader dangling: the three Ephrata entrances I created help bring the immensity and beauty of the surrounding landscape into focus. As in many inhospitable environments the people are at the land's mercy but they don't act like it. The landscape is utterly beautiful to them, yet there is very little within the town that people have built that has its own beauty. The entrances are marked by forms derived from the surrounding basalt cliffs in the coulees and are composed of the predominant elements of the landscape—sage, grasses, basalt columns, and basalt stones. But each entrance also has detailing of some sort that sets the marker apart from the landscape as obviously human-made, such as amidst a basalt wall a



Columbia River Basin,



cluster of trees, which could not grow without irrigation and which are lit up at night so they appear to float above the road; clusters of basalt columns that are canted at angles that don't exist in the cliffs; and a crushed rock design on an earth mound that does not naturally exist. Part of the Ephrata community already understands that these markers will become familiar landmarks signaling departure and return in a way that a typical sign could not; the other part doesn't like it one bit.

This isn't a fairy-tale public art project, but it sure is opening up some new directions for me and the town. I have been impressed with what the town is attempting to do as they continue to think up the next idea based on the one before. We have worked together to make what we've done so far be successful.

If there is a reason for public art to exist these days for me, it is to be a catalyst and conduit for the buried and unsung images and ideas of ordinary people. I do not mean leading them around in a workshop where they might make a tile or two. I mean listening to them, looking at where and how they live, and making an interpretation through art that respects them. It means bringing something new into their thinking. It means reintroducing them to the sensory world, the art of looking. It means more than I have space to muse about.

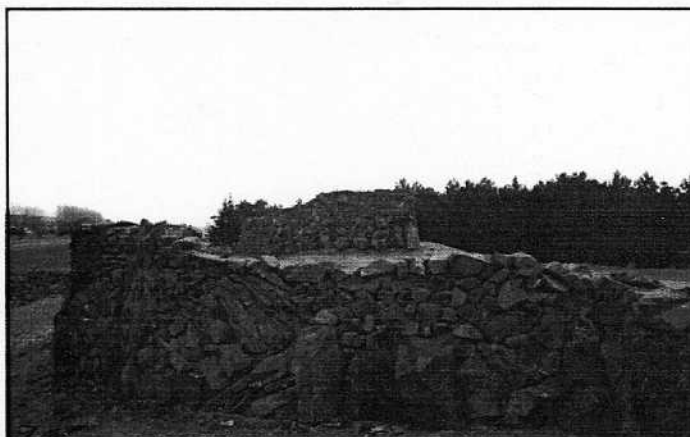
If this is to happen, public art projects will need more artists who are broad thinkers

Ephrata Project, road to Moses Lake (in progress), 1993-94. excavated areas on either side of road contain ten basalt columns 6 to 10 feet tall. The project will include indigenous grasses and solar lighting system.

and good listeners. Artists who love poking around in the world outside the art world and their own home and community and who are willing to inventively share how they think and observe in order to draw out the thoughts and observations of a range of people. This area of art making needs artists who are able to divert people away from their easy

expressions or gestures of creative inability. I hope more artists become interested in working in this way, in the land of public art commissions, to add to the hardy few who already are.

CAROLYN LAW, a visual artist living in Seattle, is currently working on a mass-transit design team and creates installations and works on paper in her studio.



Ephrata project, road to Quincy (in progress) 1993-94, three part 150-foot basalt veneer wall and earth mound: will include white birches and quaking aspen trees, indigenous grasses and wildflowers, and solar lighting system.

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