

PUBLIC ART AND PUBLIC VALUES

THE BLUE SHIRT

ARTHUR PONTYNEN

Public art commissions serve as valuable indicators of community values. They can also serve as flashpoints of discord. An example of this is the recent and disputed commissioning of the *Blue Shirt* in Milwaukee by Dennis Oppenheim.

As a matter of public policy the Milwaukee County Board has a Percent for Art Program, for the production and installation of public art.

The responsibility for implementing this program is placed in the hands of a Public Art Committee. That committee includes people with extensive training and credentials in the arts, along with others who do not have an arts background. As part of the planned construction of a parking structure at Mitchell International Airport, the Public Art Committee reviewed proposals for the inclusion of public art at the site. That committee selected the *Blue Shirt* out of almost 100 proposals submitted. The proposal was to construct a 34-foot tall and 40-foot wide architectural sculpture of a translucent shirt, at a cost of \$220,000. The plastic shirt was to be draped around the exterior corner of the parking structure; in the shirt's interior there would be depicted furniture relating to human physiology.



The Milwaukee County Board first approved the Public Art Committee's recommendation, but after much public debate and criticism acquiesced to it being rescinded. Was the abandonment of the *Blue Shirt* a good decision? The answer to that question centers on its cultural value, and how that value is to be determined is the crux of the controversy.

There are three primary ways of determining the value of any work of art. One position holds that works of art are the product of genius, and impartial experts attempt to provide the public with explanations of those objects. Another position is that sheer majority opinion ought to have the final say. Neither of these options is ultimately satisfying, nor traditionally American. The traditional position is that an informed citizenry should rightly be the final arbiter of such matters. That is, with an accurate understanding of the meaning of the *Blue Shirt*, the public has the right and the responsibility of deciding whether or not to publicly support a work of art and its ideals.

Arthur Pontynen is associate professor of Art History and chair, Department of Art, University of Wisconsin Oshkosh.

With one important difference, the Milwaukee County model for selecting public art mirrors that of the National Endowment for the Arts and of other Federal programs. As the charge to the NEA states, it is taken for granted that by following the advice of disinterested art experts an impartial recognition and promotion of fine arts is to be achieved for the public good. The assumption of impartiality lends credence to the charge that failure to adhere to this model constitutes philistinism and even censorship. It is the claim of expert impartiality and authority that the recent events in Milwaukee call into question, and rightly so.

Indeed, such claims of impartiality make no sense. How can a work of fine art be selected impartially, and how can “the public good” be defined impartially? The obvious answer is that they cannot. Seeking the public good requires partiality, as does the selection of fine art. It is not then an issue of censorship vs. impartiality. Rather, it is an issue of whose value judgments will publicly prevail, and why.

Let’s be clear: how well a thing is made or done can often be evaluated impartially. But a work of art is more than a thing made or done. It is an object or event with meaning, and the quality of its meaning — of its content — is subject to evaluation. That evaluation cannot be impartial. An attempt to impartially evaluate the quality of a work of art makes no sense unless we decide that the quality of its content doesn’t matter. And if that is the case, then not only do we favor an indifference to content, but we also have no justification for the funding of public art. Without a concern for the quality of the content of a work of art, any well-made structure or object is art. In that case everything, and nothing, is public art. That is not a position likely to win public approval, much less public funding.

So neither public art nor the experts who recognize it as such are disinterested or impartial. Nor is it impartial to claim to be an artist. It is common today to assume that fine art is the product of genius, and as such is beyond

criticism. Some would go so far as to claim that to dispute the quality of an object produced by a genius is to engage in censorship. That argument depends on a vacuous circularity: genius determines art, and art is made by the genius.

There is also an inherent arrogance in the claim that works of art are produced by (impartial) genius and selected by (impartial) experts. That arrogance is evidenced by the charges of censorship that often arise when those works are not paid for with public funding. This association of the First Amendment with an assumed right to public monies is breathtaking in its audacity. Subsidized free speech is not a Constitutional right. If freedom of expression mandates public funding, then we should all demand that our public utterances receive compensation — or is that benefit reserved for those who claim to be impartial geniuses or experts?

The foundational problem with a denial of the public’s right to evaluate the value of proposed public art is that it smacks of totalitarianism. It denies the probity of informed debate concerning the merits of objects alleged by someone to be works of fine art. But alternatively, to accept the view that majority opinion determines public values is equally reprehensible. It smacks of nihilism where the lowest common denominator determines public values and art.

But there is an alternative to totalitarianism and nihilism. That alternative is found in the traditional notion of an informed and free citizenry assuming responsibility for the ideals promoted in the public square.

The issue of public art centers on what values should be promoted in the public square. The passions surrounding disputed public arts project such as Dennis Oppenheim’s *Blue Shirt* mark a clear dividing line in the dynamics of cultural life of Milwaukee — and beyond. It is a dividing line that is becoming clearer with each passing year. Indeed, the Milwaukee controversy echoes one that was resolved in 1989.

It was in that year that a federally commissioned project was removed from Federal

Plaza in New York City. The Federal Government's Art in Architecture Program commissioned Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* in 1981. The *Tilted Arc* was a raw and rusting steel wall, approximately 150 feet long and 10 feet high, which bisected Federal Plaza, Foley Square, New York City. Some art experts championed it as an important work of Minimal art (Minimalism denies the possibility of any valid and objective ideals in life); its opponents agreed that it was minimal, and that was precisely the problem. The people who worked in buildings surrounding Federal Plaza complained that the *Tilted Arc* destroyed their ability to enjoy the square, now bifurcated by an empty obstruction of minimal interest. The outcome of this controversy was the dismantling of the installed work, to the great relief of the plaintiffs and to howling objections from the artist and many art experts.

A similar controversy, with a different outcome, occurred in the commissioning of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C. That public art commission famously presents two opposing viewpoints: the Minimalist work of Maya Lin and the Heroic work of Frederick Hart. The stark contrast between their works of public art points up a fundamental conflict of values. For the knowledgeable proponents of the work of Richard Serra or of Maya Lin, their works of fine art represent foundational beliefs and values, which can be rejected only by the philistine or fool. But to those who believe in ideals and honor the heroic pursuit of those ideals, Minimalist art is seen as fundamentally corrosive to positive public values. The tenuous compromise presented by the inclusion of both points of view in the Vietnam Memorial is therefore ultimately unsatisfactory. Minimalism and Idealism cannot both be right.

What then of the *Blue Shirt*? To evaluate the merits of the *Blue Shirt* we need to examine the quality of its content. The dilemma is that from a Modernist Liberal position the quality of the content cannot objectively be judged. Why not? Because the root belief of that viewpoint is grounded in a dogmatic relativism in which there can be no objective purpose and no objective ideals in politics and life. For Modernist Liberals all values and meanings are a matter of perspective and ultimately a matter of power. As such, judgments of value are based upon subjective claims of genius or authority, on an act of will that can be either benevolent or malevolent.

*But if this marks
political factionalism,
the faction in question
enjoys support from an
overwhelming majority
of elected Milwaukee
County government
officials.*

Since a critique of the *Blue Shirt* cannot (from the Liberal Modernist point of view) be objective, it must be grounded in a malevolent will. But if that is the case, it is equally plausible to conclude that the *selection* of the *Blue Shirt* as a work of art is also grounded in a malevolent will. This game of gauging the nature of someone else's intentions is well illustrated by the response of Dennis Oppenheim (*Milwaukee Journal*

Sentinel, February 20, 2002) to the news that his commission had been rescinded.

It's a form of censorship that's occurring there. It's an occasion where a cultural event is overthrown by a political faction. . . . It doesn't look very good now. It looks like a place that censors art.

For the Milwaukee County Board to dispute the merits of his proposed work of public art is cited as evidence not of responsible government, but rather of political factionalism. But if this marks political factionalism, the faction in question enjoys support from an overwhelming majority of elected Milwaukee County government officials. The County Executive of Milwaukee, and 20 out of 25

County Board members, found the *Blue Shirt* project inadequate. But were they right? Were they indeed acting knowledgeably and benevolently or were they malevolent?

Specious claims of artistic genius and impartial expertise do not help us answer that question, since in the context of commissioning public art those claims are themselves, necessarily, political. To assert that a particular political faction overthrew a cultural event ignores the fact that the cultural event had already been endorsed by a different political faction. The commissioning of public art is necessarily political, but is it true that all politics are Minimalist, are necessarily lacking in ideals, and therefore reliant upon brute assertions of power? Or can they be heroic? Can public judgments of quality be informed by lofty principle? If so, then the *Blue Shirt* was rightly recognized as a tragically out-of-date proposal that presumes and promotes a trivialized and uncivil vision of community life.

To the point, what is the meaning of the *Blue Shirt* and is that meaning worth believing? This question can be approached in two ways: by what the work of art says and what it leaves unsaid. What it says can be approached by referring to the artist's comments. In an interview Oppenheim stated that the work was inspired by the spectacle of streams of passengers turning the corner at the airport. The blue shirt wraps around the corner of the building as do the passersby. It is the process, the activity, which interests him, as it did with a previous commission, *Jump and Twist*. In *Jump and Twist* and *Blue Shirt* there are *conceptual* associations made between a building, people, and processes.

That *conceptual* approach to art is characteristic of Oppenheim's art and career. But just what does that mean? Proponents of Conceptualism understand it to be centered on epistemology. It centers not on meaning but on process. The art object represents what we do rather than why we ought to do something. It is decidedly un-heroic. It focuses on activity rather than purpose. It centers on means rather than ends. In representing such purposeless

activity there is an element of whimsy, but also an element of the dangerous, the twisted, or creepy (*Artforum Magazine*, November 1993). And what could be creepy about the *Blue Shirt*? An assumption consistently evidenced by Oppenheim's 40-year oeuvre: the theme of the "homunculus or automaton, which embodies the idea that human beings are like stamped-out mechanical entities lacking free will . . . a view shared by many modern thinkers from B.F. Skinner to Michel Foucault" (*Art in America*, April 2001).

The content of Relativism is evidenced both by the Minimal art of Serra and Lin, and by the Conceptualism of Oppenheim. As Relativists they deny the possibility of lofty purpose in art and life, and they deny the possibility of obtaining wisdom or beauty. Therefore any attempts to explain and evaluate the meaning of Oppenheim's art and career are subject to dispute. But before the defenders of Oppenheim's art make the charge that these assessments are selectively malevolent, they ought to note that the remarks just cited concerning Oppenheim's work are presented by proponents of his viewpoint. And that is creepy indeed.

Rather than engage in such disputes concerning the meaning of Oppenheim's art, one can equally observe what that art does not say. And what it does not say can truly be informative. What Conceptualism does not say is exactly what its alternatives offer: that somehow, ultimately, life does have meaning and purpose. Life is not just a process, not just a mechanistic or random series of events. Rather, life is formed and informed with meaning, however difficult to perceive or to live by. From this point of view neither Minimalism nor Conceptualism offers much. In each case it is seen as a cultural and political void, a void without hope and without merit. A void that the public rightfully should resist.

To discuss the merits of public art is to engage in a discussion of public values. It is a discussion that has long been abandoned by Modernist and Postmodernist Liberalism. I like to think that discussion has been abandoned

not owing to malevolence but rather by provincialism — the result of a solipsistic vision that holds all visions of life to be a matter of perspective and ultimately a matter of power. A vision held by those lost in the fantasy that their power is benevolent but the other's is not. But beyond the issue of such prejudice and fantasy is that of quality, the quality of artistic content and the quality of our public life. We have long been told that such a conversation about

quality need not or cannot occur. That we are trapped in a dogmatic relativism — a relativism in which ideals have no place, and an empty tolerance or a balance of power is the last redoubt of civility. No wonder the fine arts — and the public realm — have been reduced to entertainment, therapy, or propaganda. It is time for a renewed conversation about the values that ought to inform our public life and art. That conversation has in fact already begun.