

Neglect, not safety, likely undoing of Heizer work

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Q.: In Lansing, the fate of "This Equals That" is compared with Richard Serra's "Tilted Arc," removed from Federal Plaza in 1989. Are the two cases similar?

A.: It sounds very different. The Heizer piece was more or less removed as a function of neglect. The Serra piece was removed because a number of people hated it intensely enough to pursue its removal. A landscape piece of the New York sculptor Allen Sonfist in St. Louis is closer to the Heizer example. Sonfist decided to forgo a lawsuit against the City of St. Louis when it tore down a work city maintenance workers hadn't properly maintained. "I didn't want to spend a month or two in St. Louis pursuing this; I thought I'd get an ulcer," he said. It was removed by the local sanitation unit. They didn't ask anybody, either.

Q.: The state Department of Management and Budget claims they're putting Heizer's sculpture in storage because it's a "safety issue." Does this happen often?

A.: "Safety" is one of the first things that are usually cited. There's a sculpture called "Baltimore Federal" by George Sugarman, a General Services Administration commission of 1978. It is a colorful, open lattice-work type of metal sculpture. There were people who were concerned that rapists could hide behind it -- quite a fanciful fear. A "public hazard" is one of the basic grounds under which you can remove anything.

Q.: Are such claims valid?

A.: I have never seen a sculpture that was a safety hazard. One of the things they said about the Serra was that bombs could be deflected from it. Now, that might appear a little more realistic in the light of what happened near that site on 9/11, but I don't believe it to be a realistic fear. It was a cover-up. I don't know if such excuses are always a conscious cover-up. Perhaps there is something about abstract contemporary art that inspires such a sense of uneasiness that for many people in the audience, it does translate into a kind of

fear.

Q.: Let's just assume the safety issue was valid. Even so, shouldn't the Department of Management and Budget first consult the artist, or communicate plans within the art community?

A.: They should always do that first. That's very standard. This leads to another troubling issue: As far as I know to this day most of public art programs don't have deaccessioning (removing from display) policies, though most museums do. You would think there should be a process at least as rigorous as the commissioning process for the deaccessioning process. Let's assume the sculpture is commissioned, and then it's erected. And then suddenly there's damage, or the environment changes, or some other thing happens that someone didn't take into account. The first thing to do would be to apply the deaccessioning policy. Not having such a policy in place, there should still be some official process for determining whether these claims are valid. And certainly the artist should be involved, because there might be the option on the artist's part to make some adjustments!

Q.: Looking at the bureaucratic responses to Richard Serra's and Michael Heizer's artwork in New York City and Lansing, do you see any similarities?

A.: Yes, obviously the person responsible for the commission, and who supported the art, was no longer in power. And the next administration didn't have an interest in art.

Q.: Why hasn't "This Equals That" become famous? Did Michigan do a bad job in terms of marketing?

A.: The way information about public art is shared is first of all very sketchy. It's not included in most books, and it's not reviewed in ART (magazine). It's part of the same economic system as gallery art, but it doesn't go into a museum. How would somebody like me, who knows more about public art than most people - just because I've been doing it for a long time -- find out about public art? Somebody may send me a press release. I've never received one from Michigan. The artwork may be in a place I visit, but there's no art conference in Lansing, which would attract me there. It's not in a city that's well known for public art. It's more likely that I'd find out if it had been in Seattle, because I know about Heizer's "Adjacent, Against, Upon," which I saw when I was there. My guess is that "This Equals That" is not part of the art loop.

Q.: The Lansing State Journal featured a letter recommending trashing "This Equals That" to save storage expenses. An editorial proposed "more Norman Rockwell and less Picasso." Do such attitudes exist in NYC, too?

A.: Absolutely. I'm very aware of the absence of art education in our public schools. And it's not to say that just because you have art education people would like Heizer or Serra. But I do think that you have to assume there is a very large uninformed audience. I've come to believe that successful public art has to work on very many levels. It must provide an entry point for an uninformed art audience. That could be anything; it could be color. I'm not advocating that public art be watered down, but the best art works on very many levels.

Q.: One would think "This Equals That," a geometric design based on a simple mathematical formula, invites people to understand the art work. However, my research shows not many people actually knew the sculpture existed, because they weren't able to see it from their car. In Michigan public art has to be in immediate sight, from the road.

A.: That's a very interesting observation. It has a ring of truth to it. People on the East Coast are not in the car all of the time. Maybe they should put artwork in the parking lot of a shopping mall, or a place where people are forced to walk, in front of City Hall, or in a park.

Q.: Many of the sculptures we see today were commissioned in the 1960s and 1970s. Do cities like Lansing today no longer need symbols of civic pride, have people given up on the idea?

A.: I think people still need this. What would they use otherwise? What would be the image on civic stationery? If somebody were called upon to sketch an image of Lansing, what would they paint? In New York there are a lot of images, such as the Statue of Liberty, the Empire State Building. A number of things come immediately to mind. So I would say if Lansing doesn't have something that convincingly does that, maybe they should go and find the right piece of public art!

Q.: Michigan says it plans to restore Heizer's piece. But "This Equals That" may also never find its way out of storage. Do you think restoration is probable?

A.: My guess, and my own experience, is that unless there's an individual or an institution who would undertake the fundraising drive, then it's probably over. I mean, unless there was somebody else in the governor's or mayor's office, or the local museum or art council, who took it on as a cause.

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