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Local conflicts over public art have occurred throughout the United States. In Memphis, controversy erupted over inclusion of the phrase “Workers of the World, Unite!” in a sidewalk designed for the city’s new public library. In Milwaukee, selection of Dennis Oppenheim’s fiber-glass sculpture *Blue Shirt* for an airport parking garage was perceived as a slur on the city’s working-class roots. In Boston, a public art tribute to Polish patriots created controversy when it was first placed in a remote corner of the city’s Common in 1983, and then generated even more consternation when it was moved into storage in 2006. In Portland, ME, a bronze sculpture of an all-white family heading to a baseball game unleashed accusations of racism. And in Baldwin Park, CA, a public art project that draws attention to the city’s indigenous peoples and histories—and explored in more detail in this *Monograph*—was attacked by anti-immigration groups.

Public Art Controversy: Cultural Expression and Civic Debate

By Erika Doss

Mention the words “public art” and you’ll get a variety of responses, from a nod of recognition from those who identify with America’s many public tributes to its ancestors and histories to a shrug of disinterest from those who feel neglected in the nation’s cultural landscape—sometimes even a groan of “help!” from city officials and arts administrators when public art becomes controversial. And public art—precisely because it’s public *and* because it’s art—has a history of controversy.

It took some 40 years to build the Washington Monument, which finally opened to the public in 1888 after decades of wrangling over its design and financing. By comparison, it only took a few years to build the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, dedicated in 1982, even though heated debate about the monument and its meaning raged for years. Today, these memorials are among America’s most popular works of public art.

Conflicts over public art at the local level often persuade community leaders, elected officials, funding agencies, and artists themselves that public art is simply “too hot to handle.” But these heated debates also suggest that the American public, often typecast as apathetic and uninformed, is keenly interested in cultural conversations about creative expression and civic and national identity. The dynamics surrounding public art reveal an ongoing American commitment to meaningful conversations, which are the cornerstones of an active democratic culture.

Surveying several recent public art controversies, this *Monograph* is intended as a guide for arts professionals, civic leaders, and educators. Discussing both the expansive terrain of public art and its lightning rod tendency to spark debate, it considers how public art controversy can be used as a tool that enhances community awareness and civic life.

Multiple Art / Multiple Publics

Definitions of public art, as Jack Becker details in his 2004 *Americans for the Arts Monograph* on the subject, are wide ranging and always changing. The city of 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.*¹

It's quite a list. That's because whether permanent or temporary, figurative or abstract, man-made or mass produced, public art is as diverse as the people who view it. As Becker remarks, public art is a "multifaceted" cultural arena that is "open to artists of all stripes, without predetermined rules or a mutually agreed upon critical language."

Public art's multifaceted dimensions segue with the multifaceted forms and multiple publics of America itself. As Michael Warner argues, the notion of the "public" or of being a public is fictive and highly unstable: "No one really inhabits the general public. This is true not only because it is by definition general but also because everyone brings to such a category the particularities from which she has to abstract herself in consuming this discourse."² While the idea of a general public is a naturalizing construction of American nationalism, *being* a public depends on the shared assumptions of its participants that they comprise America's public sphere, and are hence entitled to its rights and privileges. Today's

public art diversity speaks to America's diversity—and to the increasing number of Americans who want to see their cultural interests represented in the public sphere.

Public art includes sculptures, murals, memorials, monuments, civic gateways, pocket parks, playgrounds, and outdoor performances. It ranges from ephemeral pieces like *The Gates*, Christo and Jeanne-Claude's project of 7,500 saffron-colored fabric gates installed for just a few weeks in New York's Central Park in February 2005, to permanent public fixtures like *Kinetic Light/Air Curtain*, Antonette Rosato and Bill Maxwell's mile-long installation of 5,280 minipropellers, backlit in blue neon, that spin wildly when trains pass by them at the Denver International Airport.

Projects can be noticeably massive, like the *NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt*, a collaborative project that by 2005 featured more than 46,000 panels. Or they can be subtle, showing up in unexpected places and spaces, like the various sculptural "insertions" that Mel Chin and other artists made among the collections of the Martin Luther King Jr. Library in San Jose, CA. From sober and reflective to whimsical, today's public art embodies the ideas, initiatives, and inspirations of America's many publics.

Traditional Forms of Public Art

Traditional forms of American public art include figurative sculptures displayed in public spaces—outdoors or in public buildings. Often, these are erected as monuments or memorials to important national figures and moments. Indeed, the first public artwork commissioned by the U.S. government (for \$44,000) was Horatio Greenough's *George Washington*, a 12-ton marble sculpture of America's first president. Not surprisingly, it was also hugely controversial: Greenough modeled his monument on the Greek god Zeus and depicted

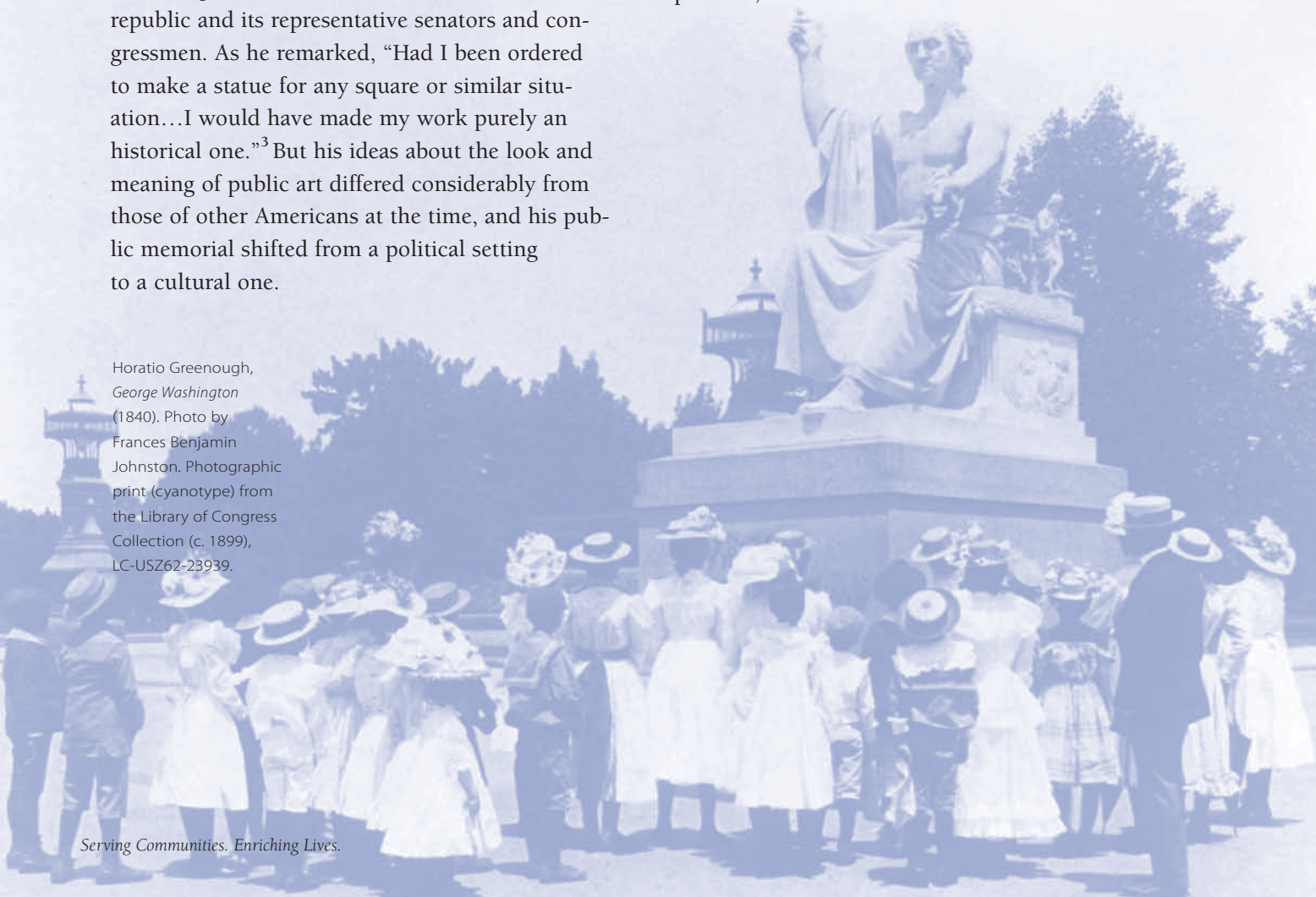
Washington semiclothed in a toga, sitting on a classical throne, and raising his right hand in an imperial gesture toward the heavens.

Unfortunately, Greenough's neoclassical tribute to America's first father did not go over particularly well in an era of post-Jacksonian populism. Installed in the U.S. Capitol Rotunda in 1841, the sculpture was moved outside onto the Capitol grounds in 1843 after numerous complaints about the public display of nudity—and because the sculpture's heavy weight was beginning to crack the Rotunda floor. In 1908, the statue was transferred to the Smithsonian Institution; since 1964 it has been displayed in the National Museum of American History. Popular perception may paint George Washington as uncontroversial, but coming to terms with how to remember him certainly was not. Greenough defended his statue of a bare-chested Washington, arguing that it fit perfectly with the political milieu of the new American republic and its representative senators and congressmen. As he remarked, "Had I been ordered to make a statue for any square or similar situation...I would have made my work purely an historical one."³ But his ideas about the look and meaning of public art differed considerably from those of other Americans at the time, and his public memorial shifted from a political setting to a cultural one.

Shifting Terms of Public Art

At least Greenough's installation still survives. Other public memorials and memorial places from that era and earlier were not so fortunate. Following America's declaration of independence, for example, a gilded-lead equestrian statue of King George III—designed by British artist Joseph Wilton and erected in New York City's Bowling Green in 1770—was pulled down from its 15-foot pedestal, disembodied, and eventually melted into bullets for the Continental Army. Likewise, as the modern city of New York emerged and expanded, the 18th-century public cemetery of thousands of enslaved Africans—a six-acre site in what is now Lower Manhattan—was paved over and forgotten. Not until 1991, during initial construction of a new federal office building at 290 Broadway, was this burial ground rediscovered and returned to public consciousness as a significant cultural, political, and sacred site.

Horatio Greenough,
George Washington
(1840). Photo by
Frances Benjamin
Johnston. Photographic
print (cyanotype) from
the Library of Congress
Collection (c. 1899),
LC-USZ62-23939.



Today, the African Burial Ground is a National Historic Landmark and National Monument, including an \$8 million public memorial and visitor center. The 34-story Ted Weiss Federal Building—adjacent to the burial ground—also features a number of commissioned works of public art, including Houston Conwill's 40-foot-diameter terrazzo and polished brass floor piece, *The New Ring Shout* (1994); Barbara Chase-Riboud's 15-foot bronze sculpture, *Africa Rising* (1998); and Roger Brown's 14-foot-tall, 10-foot-wide glass mosaic wall piece, *Untitled* (1994). The African Burial Ground has become one of the most informative and engaging sites of public culture in New York. It shows the shifting circumstances of American public culture and that original intentions regarding public art's placement, permanence, and public interpretation are often subject to change and reconsideration.

Funding

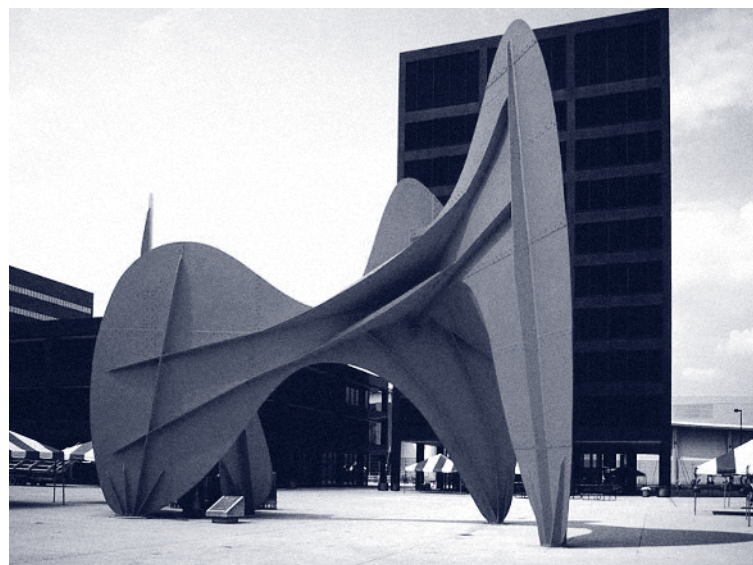
The public art projects developed at the site of the African Burial Ground are the result of U.S. General Services Administration (GSA) funding initiatives, whereby a certain percentage of the budget for federal building projects is allocated for acquiring or commissioning artwork. The \$276 million Ted Weiss Federal Building, for example, generated more than \$20 million in funding for public art.

Funding can be the source of many public art controversies. The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) was established in 1965 to foster American culture with federal funding. One year later, the NEA formed its Art in Public Places program, and in 1973 helped to revitalize the GSA's Art in Architecture program. These early programs were guided by the idea that public art was a form of civic improvement and could help generate a shared sense of civic and national identity.

During the tumultuous 1960s, public art was viewed as a way to beautify America's public spaces and simultaneously unify a public divided over issues of race, gender, and the Vietnam War. Grand Rapids, MI, dedicated *La Grande Vitesse*, a 43-foot-tall red stabile by Alexander Calder, in 1969. Engaged in a vigorous urban renewal program, Grand Rapids commissioned the sculpture to centerpiece a refurbished central plaza. The city raised \$85,000 in private funds and received \$45,000 from the NEA to pay for it—the first example of NEA-funded public art in America.

Throughout the next few decades, thousands of cities followed suit with large modernist and abstract sculptures, many of them sited in public plazas and funded by NEA- and GSA-sponsored initiatives. Such federal funding strategies inspired local, regional, and state public art initiatives—including percent-for-art programs at state and local levels, in which certain percentages of capital construction costs are dedicated to public art projects. Of course, enhanced grassroots participation in public culture also inspires public conversations about the purpose and meaning of public art. Its visibly public presence, its frequent dependence on public dollars, and its originating

Alexander Calder, *La Grande Vitesse* (1969). Grand Rapids, MI. Photo by Erika Doss.



concept as a unifying form of civic beautification can make public art a beacon for controversy. Not all Americans are interested in cultural representation via modernist, abstract sculpture or share reformist visions of public space. It's difficult to imagine any kind of contemporary public art that might adequately address the multifaceted interests of today's diverse America.

Public diversity helps to account for the recent mushrooming of the public art industry—"the fastest-growing industry in the United States," declared *New York Times* art critic Grace Glueck in 1982.⁴ By 2003, the nation featured more than 350 public art programs. Most are financed by percent-for-art ordinances, as well as funding streams such as tax revenues, grants, gifts, and corporate sponsorship. In recent decades, millions of dollars have been generated to develop thousands of public art projects and also to finance public art maintenance, conservation, staff, and educational programming. Supported by local and state art agencies, national organizations (like the Public Art Network, a program of Americans for the Arts), degree-granting programs (at schools such as the University of Southern California and the University of Washington), and a growing body of artists engaged in the demands and dynamics of the field, public art has become increasingly professional, legitimate, and visible in America.

Placemaking

Public art's visibility relates to its functional utility. Since the 1970s, Miwon Kwon explains, public art has been charged with generating "place-bound identity" and lending a sense of distinction and authenticity to the nation's ever more homogenous public spaces. Critics and historians such as Ronald Lee Fleming and Renata von Tscherner argue that a "spectre of placelessness" characterizes many of today's built environments; shopping malls, airports, office parks, and housing developments are so similar



Andrew Leicester,
Cincinnati Gateway
(1988). Cincinnati, OH.
Photo by Erika Doss.

that it is hard to distinguish one from the other. This "banal sameness" is thought to keep people from establishing a sense of place or community identity. Public art is seen as a solution to the problem of placelessness, especially in its ability to remedy social alienation and generate a sense of civic and community identity.

A widespread interest in *genius loci*—spirit of place—has helped generate site-specific works of art: public art projects that engage specific factors such as location, audience, and history. *Cincinnati Gateway*, a public art project designed by Andrew Leicester in 1988, is a good example. The official entrance to Sawyer Point Park, a refurbished 22-acre site along Cincinnati's once-polluted industrial riverfront, the environmental sculpture features dozens of historical references to Cincinnati's past. These range from canal locks and steamship stacks (reminders of the city's dependence on water-based commerce) to flying pigs (symbols of the city's 19th-century prominence as a hog-butcher capital). The entire sculpture resembles an enormous effigy mound, referencing the built forms of the region's

Adena and Hopewell Native American cultures. Equal parts history lesson, urban renewal, and civic boosterism, *Cincinnati Gateway* has become a beloved emblem of the city and a place frequented by locals and tourists alike.

Douglas McGill describes this new public art as “art plus function, whether the function is to provide a place to sit for lunch, to provide water drainage, to mark an important historical date, or to enhance and direct a viewer’s perceptions.”⁵ Public needs, public participation, and public responses are all key to the making and meaning of today’s public art. Occasional arguments for the sheer existence of art in America are countered by widespread assumptions about public art’s civic and social responsibilities. And contemporary public art that fails to generate some sense of spatial and/or social relevance is often snidely dismissed as “plop” art. But the sort of identity and relevance that public art is supposed to generate—not to mention *which* American public art piece is meant for—is often a source of conflict.

Controversy over Public Art

Why is public art so controversial? Answers vary, but in general public art controversy relates to the essentially conversational nature of the art itself. Usually located in visible public spaces, organized by public committees, frequently funded by public dollars, and intended for multiple audiences, public art is, by definition, the product of public feedback. It centers on dialogue—on the expressed interests and issues of particular groups—and that dialogue can be contentious. Conversations and debates about public art range from subject to site and involve competitions, commissions, hearings, juries, artists’ statements, awards, media accounts, and the art-making pro-

cess itself. These conversations include artists, art administrators, civic leaders, funders, architects, engineers, and, of course, the public.

Public art discourse, like all conversations, can lead to a larger examination and questioning of assumptions, ideas, and concepts. Plenty of controversies have, in fact, generated meaningful conversations about public culture. In Cincinnati, animated debate about *Cincinnati Gateway*’s flying pigs led to widespread local discussion about issues of civic identity and cultural expression; in Phoenix, heated talk about a public art project installed along a five-mile strip of highway turned into meaningful conversation about public design. But we are also living in extraordinarily contentious times, marked by especially fierce talk about issues of political representation, war, reproductive rights, and immigration. These issues are sensationalized in the media, where ranting and rancor, finger-pointing and name-calling can dominate. The antagonistic tones of mass media talk culture have dramatically shaped larger cultural understanding of how to talk in America—and, not surprisingly, conversations about public art are often similarly hostile and intolerant.

Contemporary conflicts over public art especially relate to contemporary concerns about cultural control and questions about artistic, social, and economic authority. America’s national ideal as an equitable, unified, and rational democracy often yields to reality. As Rosalyn Deutsche remarks, public space is marked by “conflictual and uneven social relations.”⁶ Heated conversations over public art subjects, styles, and costs relate particularly to perceptions of public representation, or the lack thereof, in America’s “uneven” public spaces. Angered by perceptions of powerlessness and invisibility, many Americans target public art. Indeed, controversies over public art tend to unmask deeper concerns Americans have regarding their voices and their interests in the public sphere.

Controversy in the Capital: The FDR Memorial

One explanation for public art controversy is the sense of entitlement that pervades today's public sphere. Increasingly, diverse and often competing self-interest groups view public art as the direct extension of their particular causes. The Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial—a \$48 million, 7.5-acre site in Washington, DC—is a prime example. Designed by Lawrence Halprin, the project was dedicated in 1997. Soon thereafter, however, the National Organization on Disability insisted that the memorial also depict the president's physical handicap. In 2001, a bronze statue of FDR in a wheelchair was added at the memorial's entrance.

Stricken with infantile paralysis (polio) in 1921, FDR himself downplayed and disguised his physical impairment, believing that its social perception as a “disability” might negatively shape his public image and limit his political opportunities. Only three known photographs show him in a wheelchair, and he went to great lengths to represent himself as a healthy, competent, and powerful presidential body. Sculptor Neil Estern conveyed this commanding figure in the FDR Memorial's original statue of the president, titled *FDR and Fala*. An oversized bronze portrait of FDR (almost nine feet in height), Estern's sculpture depicts the president cloaked in a long

military cape, seated on a high-backed armchair equipped with tiny casters (one of which can be seen at the back of the sculpture), and attended by his faithful dog Fala.

Yet this public sculpture was deemed inadequate by disability activists, who insisted that Roosevelt's memorial more blatantly commemorate their own interests. There was not the only claim to public art representation: anti-smoking lobbyists succeeded in eliminating any references to FDR's cigarette habit, and animal rights groups managed to suppress the inclusion of a fox stole in a statue of Eleanor Roosevelt. All of these claims and, in fact, the entire memorial ignore Roosevelt's own preferences. As Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter related in a 1961 issue of *Atlantic Monthly*, FDR wanted nothing more than a modest block of stone, “without any ornamentation” and inscribed only with the words “In memory of—.” Such a stone was, in fact, placed at the National Archives in 1965.

Neil Estern, *FDR and Fala*
(1997). FDR Memorial,
Washington, DC.
Photo by Erika Doss.



These and other efforts to claim and control public art extend, in part, from an expanded emphasis on identity politics and citizen rights in contemporary America. Writing about current perceptions of citizenship, Michael Schudson explains that “rights consciousness” has become dominant in the wake of the civil rights movement, as American courts and legislatures have become increasingly attuned to the obligations of law and government regarding the claims of individuals. Today’s model of citizenship is more rights-oriented—seen in the activism of the disability rights movement, for example—and today’s public sphere has become “the playing field of citizenship,” the locus where various American rights are asserted and claimed. Importantly, this “triumph of democratic sensibilities” has vastly expanded understandings of American citizenship and nationalism, of who counts today as an American, and of what causes are now deemed constitutionally fundamental to the nation—such as civil rights. Yet, Schudson cautions, such “stakeholding” can also encourage intolerant factional grievances, which is at the core of controversy surrounding public art in Baldwin Park, CA.

Judy Baca,
Danzas Indigenas
(1993). Baldwin
Park, CA. Photo
by Judy Baca.

Controversy in California: The Baldwin Park Project

In 1993, Judy Baca was commissioned by the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority and the city of Baldwin Park to create *Danzas Indigenas* for the Baldwin Park Commuter Rail Station. The modest \$56,000 Metrolink project consists of a 20-foot arch, a 100-foot plaza, and a 400-foot train platform with kiosk shelters and benches for commuters, all designed in collaboration with Kate Diamond Architectural Group and members of the community. *Danzas Indigenas* centers on historical and cultural details specific to the location and community of Baldwin Park—a quiet, working-class town nestled in the San Gabriel Valley with a predominantly Latino population of about 80,000. The



details of *Danzas Indigenas* narrate the story of the region and the community, although it’s a story that some do not want to hear.

The train platform’s floor patterns trace the site plans for several Franciscan missions that were built near Baldwin Park—an area that once consisted of ranch lands, small farms, and vineyards and was named “Pleasant View” and “Vineland” in the 19th century. Interwoven with these designs are dancing figures of the Gabrielino (or Tongva) and Chumash tribes, referencing the region’s original inhabitants and providing the project’s name: *Danzas Indigenas* (indigenous dancers). The floor text in brass lettering features five languages—Gabrielino, Chumash, Luiseno, Spanish, and English—and speaks to the waves of immigrants and the layers of history that make up this California town. Statistics on the number of cattle and grape vines raised at the nearby missions are juxtaposed with the numbers of indigenous peoples who were forced to labor at these missions. The roof designs of the metal kiosks and the arch, which is made of stucco and exposed adobe brick, allude to the Moorish architecture of the San Gabriel Mission, established in 1771 one mile away. A stone prayer mound in front of the arch is dedicated to Toypurina, a Tongva medicine woman who participated in a revolt against the mission in 1785.

The two sides of the arch further commemorate the region's past and present. One side—marked “Baldwin Park”—features comments that Baca collected from local residents speaking about their town and their hopes for the future. These include: “a small town feeling;” “not just adults leading but youth leading too;” “use your brain before you make up your mind” (stated by Baldwin Park's mayor); and “the kind of community that people dream of, rich and poor, brown, yellow, red, white, all living together.” These optimistic words are countered by another statement, tucked into a corner, that reads, “it was better before they came.” Although uttered by a local white politician discussing post-World War II Mexican immigration, Baca left the remark unexplained and ambiguous, thus inviting viewers to imagine for themselves who “they” might be.

The other side of the arch—marked “Sunigna,” the original Tongva name for the area—features pictographs of indigenous peoples and a fragment of a poem by acclaimed Chicano author Gloria Anzaldua that reads, “This land was Mexican once, was Indian always, and is, and will be again.”⁷ Reflecting on the precarious circumstances of border cultures, Anzaldua's poem speaks to the Southwest's—and all of America's—complex historical mosaic. In 1770, just before the Franciscans arrived, the Tongva numbered about 5,000 and covered a territory of some 1,500 square miles of the Los Angeles basin; until 1848, Baldwin Park, like all of Southern California, was owned by Mexico. As Baca remarks, “I wanted to put memory into a piece of land once owned by the American Indian cultures—memory and willpower are what any culture, the ones living then and those living now, has to have to preserve itself.”⁸

Reclaiming Baldwin Park as a layered site of memory, *Danzas Indigenas* remembers the history of the indigenous peoples of the region and the process of conquest and colonization that erased this history or rendered it invisible. Commissioned by the city and centered on the hopes and needs of

its residents, *Danzas Indigenas* is a multicultural model of community-based public art. But democratizing ideas about public art and the nation are not shared by all Americans today. In 2005, some 12 years after its dedication, *Danzas Indigenas* became the subject of controversy.

It began when the anti-illegal-immigrant group Save Our State (SOS) demanded removal of some of the *Danzas Indigenas* quotes, if not the destruction of the entire public art project. SOS, founded in 2004, is headquartered in Ventura, CA (85 miles from Baldwin Park). The anti-immigration group especially objected to Anzaldua's words, which they declared were “offensive and seditious” and “anti-American.” Completely taking the poem out of context, and ignoring the fact that Baldwin Park itself had embraced *Danzas Indigenas* for more than a decade, SOS accused Baca of creating an art project that advocated “reconquista,” or returning the American Southwest to Mexico. They also attacked the quote “it was better before they came,” mistakenly assuming that *they* referred to white Americans. And in a specious lawsuit filed against Baldwin Park, the city was charged with supporting racism and separatism in a “tax-supported monument.”

SOS was not really interested in public art, of course, and targeted *Danzas Indigenas* to gain publicity for its virulent anti-immigration platform. Its website, for instance, claims that Americans, “are tired of watching their communities turn

Judy Baca,
Danzas Indigenas
(1993). Baldwin
Park, CA.
Photo by
Nicolas García.



into Third World cesspools as a result of a massive invasion of illegal aliens,” and features a Hall of Shame that vilifies Latino leaders.⁹ Besieging Baldwin Park city council members and Judy Baca with death threats, SOS leader Joseph Turner boasted that his group’s “real goal” was to “bankrupt” the city by forcing it to hire extra security during the protests his group organized.

SOS’s vitriolic attacks on Baldwin Park did draw the attention of the media. But they also sparked a substantial counter-protest of public art supporters speaking to issues of freedom of expression, creative integrity, and anti-racism. Town hall meetings were called and demonstrations and marches were staged. Hundreds of Baldwin Park residents, along with area high school and university students, peace organization representatives, city politicians, and many others, rallied to defend *Danzas Indigenas*. In a “community celebration of art”—held in Baldwin Park on June 25, 2005, and featuring musicians, poets, theater groups, and dancers—Baca and members of SPARC (the Social and Public Art Resource Center, a group she founded in 1976) organized a 90-foot “mobile mural.” Made up of multiple placards held high by about 100 people and presented in three different movements, the mural—titled *You Are My Other Me*—stated in various sections: “Good art confuses racists;” “The land does not belong to us, we belong to the land;” and “America turns its back on hate groups.” Firmly pronouncing that its public art project would not be altered or removed, the Baldwin Park City Council passed a resolution honoring Baca and *Danzas Indigenas* that read, in part, “the strong sentiments expressed by people who make various interpretations of its meaning after 12 years, is a testament to its value as an artwork.”

The heated debate over *Danzas Indigenas* became a significant part of its enduring importance as public art. The anti-*Danzas Indigenas* protests actually helped to unify the residents of Baldwin Park, many of whom had not really paid much

attention to their city’s public art project during its first 12 years. As artist Suzanne Lacy put it in an online forum, also organized by SPARC and that specifically centered on the controversy over the Baldwin Park project, “Maybe this is what art is supposed to do. Maybe this is how art becomes something more than concrete and steel, paint on a canvas.”¹⁰ And as Baca herself writes about *Danzas Indigenas*:

*Our capacity as a democracy to disagree and to coexist is precisely the point of this work. No single statement can be seen without the whole, nor can it be removed without destroying the diversity of Baldwin Park’s voices. Silencing every voice with which we disagree, especially while taking quotes out of context, either through ignorance or malice, is profoundly un-American.*¹¹

Public Art Controversy and Civic Dialogue

Public culture can be contentious, especially in a country that values individualism, freedom of expression, and First Amendment rights, and yet also prizes communal experiences and relationships. Public art often has to cater to multiple constituencies and, as any politician knows, you can’t please everyone. Bowing to the interests and demands of one public may alienate another. But public art—like politics—is a collaborative exercise and depends on tolerance, compromise, and respect. Ideally, public art controversy animates creative civic dialogue. The key is to keep our public conversations meaningful and productive and to reclaim public culture as a forum for debate rather than an arena of hate.

Grounded in conversation, dialogue, and often debate, public art can serve as a symbol of civic examination, prompting further debates about community needs, hopes, and histories. As an instrument of public conversation, public art can become a catalyst for civic and national revitalization. Often because it is controversial,

Judy Baca and SPARC, *You Are My Other Me* (June 25, 2005). Three-part mobile mural, Baldwin Park, CA. Photo by Nicolas García.

public art can play a central role in shaping and directing community identity—as seen in the heated discourse over *Danzas Indigenas*. Public art has the unique potential to encourage multiple American publics to tell their stories—and to listen to others. As Baca reflects:

*Public art is an antidote for the hatred and disconnectedness in society. It is a creative, participatory, critical, and analytical process. We must tell our stories, and encourage others of all ages to tell their stories in any language they speak... We must teach ourselves and others to listen and to hear our stories because it is in the very specificity of the human experience that we learn compassion.*¹²

¹ City of Blue Springs, Missouri, “Blue Springs Public Art Commission Program Definitions,” http://www.bluespringsgov.com/Default%20Page%20Links/Art%20Commission/art_commission_definitions.htm (accessed May 15, 2006).

² Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002).

³ Horatio Greenough, quoted in, “Preserving Memory A Hit All Around,” *S.O.S. (Save Outdoor Sculpture!) Update* 14, no. 1 (Fall 2003): 2.

⁴ Grace Glueck, “Art in Public Places Stirs Widening Debate,” *New York Times*, May 23, 1982.

⁵ Douglas McGill, “Sculpture Goes Public,” *New York Times Magazine*, April 27, 1986.

⁶ Rosalyn Deutche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).

⁷ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Spinster, 1987).

⁸ Judy Baca, quoted in “Metrolink Baldwin Park Station,” Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority, http://www.mta.net/about_us/metroart/ma_mlnkjb.htm (accessed May 29, 2006).

⁹ Shirley Hsu, “Protests Unify Baldwin Park,” *Whittier Daily News* (Whittier, CA), June 24, 2005, <http://whittierdailynews.com/> (accessed October 7, 2005).

¹⁰ Suzanne Lacy, comment posted on online forum organized by SPARC on May 15, 2005, <http://www.sparcmurals.org/> (accessed October 7, 2005).

¹¹ Judy Baca, “Artist Statement,” posted on the SPARC website May 12, 2005, http://www.sparcmurals.org/sparcone/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=209&Itemid=124&limit=1&limitstart=5 (accessed October 7, 2005).

¹² Judy Baca, “Baldwin Park Press Release,” posted on the SPARC website June 27, 2005, http://www.sparcmurals.org/sparcone/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=209&Itemid=124&limit=1&limitstart=0 (accessed October 7, 2005).

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