

CHAPTER 3 A CRITICAL OVERVIEW OF PUBLIC ART

In this chapter, I critically investigate public art, both historically and theoretically. I begin with an historical overview, paying attention to developments in the field since the 1960s. This discussion raises two key issues that will be discussed at length. The first is the issue of the term “public.” How is it used, by whom, and for what purposes? The second is the urban context of public art. Since the late 1950s, public art has been legally wedded to private development through percent-for-art ordinances. What kind of relationship is this and how does it affect public space? Finally, public art does not always conspire with private interests to neutralize public space, as has been suggested by certain thinkers, since new developments in public art attempt to engage, explore, and collaborate with the public. A critical investigation of public art is important in revealing shortcomings and contextualizing public art within broader urban issues, but, like any field, public art must not be read monolithically. As will be suggested, and then explored in later chapters, public art in Schuylkill River Park (SRP) lies somewhere in between the two poles: the ideology of spatial production and the hope of a community participatory public art. While the public art and development process for SRP has ignored community, artists of merit who have worked within community participatory public art methodologies offer hope for engaging public art works.

Percent-for-Art Programs of the 1960s

Public art once consisted of “a hero on a horse,” the bronze memorial dedicated to great historical figures that glorified “a version of national history that excluded large segments of the population” (Raven 1989:1; Lacy 1995:21). The year 1967 marks a watershed for public art in this country. In that year, the National Endowment for the Arts established the Art in Public Places program whose goal was “to give the public access to the best art of our time outside museum walls” (NEA guidelines quoted in Jacob 1995a: 53). Subsequently, states and cities followed the federal precedent with percent-for-art programs. While some public art experts, like Penny Bach, director of Philadelphia’s Fairmount Park Art Association (Bach 1992), seek to link the civic sculpture of 19th century America with contemporary public art, there is little continuity between public art of the past and the present. Public art has indeed emerged as a full-blown discipline. And yet it is a field “without clear definitions, without a constructive theory, and without coherent objectives” (Phillips 1988: 93). Public art has become a profession in which experts, sometimes

in collaboration with representatives of communities, attempt to beautify, enliven, and entertain the citizens of the contemporary city. While this may seem well-intentioned, it is also often “profoundly unambitious and often reactionary” (Phillips 1988:93).

Nineteen sixties percent-for-art programs coincided with a period of widespread urban renewal and public art continues today to be an integral part of urban redevelopment strategies. With urban renewal came the realization that urban America had become ugly and that government architecture in the dominant International Style was much to blame (Wetenhall 1992: 148). Public art, it was argued, must be integrated with architecture in the design stages. According to Michael von Moschzisher, Chairman of the Redevelopment Authority and founding advocate of Philadelphia’s percent-for-art ordinance, “the work of art should be a focus round which the harmony of the whole building revolves—inseparable from the design, and aesthetically essential” (von Moschzisker 1958: 2). Public art initiated by percent-for-art programs and, later, by communities through programs such as NEA’s Art in Public Places, became important components of urban renewal programs, functioning as emblems of culture and a manifestation of the wealth, status, and benevolence of its patrons. Still, even if public art serves ideological ends, as will be examined shortly, it is important to stress that Art in Public Places, operates differently than percent-for-art programs. While the latter allots usually one percent of public and private building costs for public art, the former offers matching funds to local organizations for art intended for specific sites. Art is thus created in response to local demand and is “owned” by a local patron or community organization, rather than stipulated by a percent-for-art mandate.

The first Art in Public Places matching grant was awarded to the city of Grand Rapids, Michigan, in 1967. The city, in the midst of a major urban renewal plan, wanted to commission a sculpture by an important artist in a plaza undergoing redevelopment. Soon after the grant was announced, a panel appointed by the mayor and the NEA awarded the commission to Alexander Calder. Calder’s *La Grande Vitesse* was dedicated in 1969 and was greeted with both hostility and jubilation. Although debate continued for many months, the sculpture eventually became an icon of the city, symbolic of the urban optimism that it was intended to precipitate. Today, an image of the sculpture adorns city stationery and even garbage trucks (Halbreich 1988: 9).

Along with the establishment of guidelines for percent-for-art programs came a bureaucratic, minimum basic standard mentality. Patricia Phillips calls this the “public art ‘machine’” in which a constrictive methodology begets impotent art. According to Phillips:

To weave one’s way through its labyrinthine network of proposal submissions to appropriate agencies, filings and refilings of budget estimates, presentations to juries, and negotiations with government or corporate sponsors, requires a variety of skills that are frequently antithetical to the productions of a potent work of art (1988: 93).

Despite the attempt at making the public art process democratic, with the inclusion of community members on advisory committees, little effort has been made, until quite recently, to grapple with theoretical issues regarding the proximity of the word “public” to “art.” Thus, while the public art of the late 1960s signified the first time contemporary art left the museum in full force, it had little idea of who exactly the art was for. In other words, audience was simply not addressed in selecting works for outside display. Expert panels serving as community delegates made these decisions. Public art was conceived along the same lines as modern museum art—as the creation of individual artists. Thus, the personal working method of the artist was stressed over public values. Controversy centered on art style rather than whether art addressed a definable public. Inevitably, the museum experience was replicated outdoors by simply enlarging artworks. This has come to be known as “plunk art,” art that has been enlarged and dropped on a site, with little regard to social or environmental context.

Site-Specific Public Art and Controversy

In 1974, the NEA added the stipulation that public art should be appropriate to a given site. Thus, public art began to move away from the monumental “plunk art” that was often seen at odds with its context and adopted any permanent medium including earthworks, environmental art, and non-traditional art like artificial lighting (Lacy 1995: 23). Scott Burton, one of the most recognized of the site-specific public artists of the 1980s believed that “what architecture or design or public art have in common is their social function or content . . . Probably the culminating form of public art will be some kind of social planning” (Burton quoted in Lacy 1995: 23). Site-specific work appeared poised to engage audiences through more direct means in its increasing attention focused on historical, ecological, and sociological aspects of sites. However, as Lacy points out, site-specific public art usually only addressed such issues metaphorically, and continued to replicate the museum experience.

Yet, even site-specific public art would still take on the gargantuan proportions of its “plunk art” predecessors, as was the case with Richard Serra’s *Tilted Arc* (1981). Serra’s massive arc, made of cor-ten steel, swept across New York City’s Federal Plaza, irking office workers and government officials. Commissioned by the General Services Administration (GSA) during the Carter administration and installed in 1981, controversy did not arise in earnest until William Diamond was appointed as regional director of GSA, under the Reagan presidency, in the mid-1980s. He initiated a hearing on the sculpture’s future and Serra defended the sculpture based on censorship and failure of the federal government to fulfill a contract. The artist argued that he designed the work based on the specific dimensions of the plaza, and removing the work, even locating it elsewhere, would render it meaningless, thereby destroying it (Babon 2000). Despite the questionable motivation of the hearings, motivated by the right’s disdain for left-leaning art experts who were supposedly contemptuous of the needs of ordinary people and the authority of the federal government, the hearings “set up a remarkable public forum for the discussion on public art” (Finkelpearl 2000: 56).

During the hearings, the public art process was represented as an elitist enterprise in which NEA experts determined the art for a particular plaza in a vacuum, never asking for input from the office workers who utilized the space on a daily basis. Moreover, the artist’s argument about site-specific art was interpreted as a subversion of government space. As one witness testified, “this gigantic strip of rust is an arrogant, nose-thumbing gesture at the government and those who serve the government” (Finkelpearl 2000: 64). Those in opposition to the sculpture argued that it cut the space in half with its barrier-like form preventing the social-mixing that plazas are meant to foster, diminished light and air, reduced visibility making the space more dangerous, attracted graffiti and public urination, and potentially could contain and enhance the power of a terrorist bomb. In summary, the sculpture was dangerous and threatened social harmony, as its opponents argued. Many art world witnesses fell back on tired, modernist arguments to support Serra, that many regrettably articulated in order to present a seamless rank of support (Finkelpearl 2000). Letters from curators at the Museum of Modern Art portrayed artists, and Serra, by extension, as singular geniuses, informed by their elite position as special arbiters of culture—“a person who has special talents through which enlightenment may be gained” (Babon 2000: 123). Art world defenders of Serra

argued that he was an important artist, partially responsible for a new, minimalist-environmental sculpture style and that Serra's contribution to the Federal Plaza was the creation of a new conception of that space, not simply an art work. As a site-specific work, according to Serra, *Tilted Arc*, "through its location, height, length, horizontality and lean, grounds one in the physical condition of the place . . . The viewer becomes aware of himself and of his movement through the plaza" (Serra quoted in Babon 2000: 124). Despite Serra's interest in engaging audiences to think critically about the working conditions in and around the federal building and plaza where the artwork was situated, the artist thought little about the reality of the office worker confronting daily a 120 foot long, 12 foot tall rusting metal wall. Artist Virginia Maksymowicz has summarized the *Tilted Arc* debate nicely:

Disdain for the concerns of the people who were to live permanently with the sculpture was not only evident in the selection of the art, but in the hearings as well, where testifying office workers were often jeered by *Tilted Arc*'s defenders. Rather than stimulating real dialogue, Serra's sculpture resulted in an obstinate standoff between artists and the non-art public. Whether or not it was good art, it had been put in the wrong place—or at least put there in the wrong way. In terms of artist-community relationships, *Tilted Arc* was an absolute fiasco (1992: 156).

The *Tilted Arc* controversy and its removal in 1989 signified a watershed in the discourse on public art. After *Tilted Arc*, it was obvious that the people who were to live and work near public art must have some role in the selection of the artist and in the discussion of the evolution of the artwork. As public art worker Tom Finkelpearl explains, the *Tilted Arc* controversy precipitated a reevaluation of public art in the United States. He writes,

Administrators all over the country revised their procedures for commissioning work. 'Safeguards' were put in place to avoid the excruciating public display everyone heard about in New York City. Word was out: 'the public' must be included in the process. The General Services Administration reshuffled its procedures to be at once more bureaucratic (the GSA staff makes the final artist selection on the basis of an 'objective' series of evaluation criteria), and more sensitive to the community, with 'diverse' representation at the selection meetings (2000: 65).

However, as Finkelpearl underscores, the changes enacted by commissioning agencies were, for the most part, superficial, based on the fear of controversy rather than what might be truly meaningful to a public art audience.

As I will elaborate in Chapter 6, despite precedents established by the *Tilted Arc* controversy which effected change in federal public art policy, little effort was made to involve the local SRP

community in the public art decision making process. There were attempts on behalf of the Schuylkill River Development Council (SRDC) to inform the Philadelphia artist community regarding the public art plan and to encourage local artists to apply for the commission, and this indeed qualifies as a form of community outreach. However, SRP neighbors actually had to complain to the Fairmount Park Commission, the administering organization for all Philadelphia parks, including SRP, in order for their voices to be heard. As I will explore later, public art experts remain ambivalent about community participation, even after the *Tilted Arc* watershed. As Penny Bach, director of the Fairmount Park Art Association has explained to me, a problem in public art is the propensity for it to be *too* democratic—the artist’s vision gets compromised when too many people, some of who have little knowledge of public art, have a hand in the process. So in some respects, things have not changed since *Tilted Arc*. Luckily for the public art administrators, local community, and artists, the one proposed project for SRP whose design has been approved by the Fairmount Park Commission, does not take on the controversial tone of *Tilted Arc*, as I will make clear in Chapter 6.

The Ideology of Public Art and Urban Redevelopment

Thus, with or without the *Tilted Arc* controversy, public art over the past thirty years has been inherently problematic. Public art continues to be viewed as a way to revitalize cities by enhancing public spaces and “public” private spaces such as plazas, parks and corporate headquarters at a time when businesses and residents are vacating central business districts for the suburbs. The idea of a “public” private space is an oxymoron only if we idealistically claim discrete and opposing private and public spheres. This is actually a false dichotomy. Since urban renewal, these distinctions have become increasingly blurry, as will be argued in the next chapter. According to Rosalyn Deutsche, “public areas, paid for with public funds, furnish private redevelopment projects” while “city regulations require corporations in exchange for increased density allowances, to build privately owned atriums and plazas” (1996b: 57). These are then referred to as “public” spaces and often incorporate public art. Little effort has been made to beautify urban areas outside of downtown business districts, the very places where the majority of urban populations now live. At worst, public art is complicit with repressive urban planning

strategies, either endorsing irresponsible development and community displacement or serving as a diversion, distracting attention away from a contentious site (Phillips 1995:63-64).

It seems contradictory that just as social theorists announce the death of the public sphere, questioning historical models that envision a public as a homogenous, compliant group of engaged, reasonable actors (ala Jürgen Habermas), public art springs forth. But perhaps this is not a contradiction, but more evidence of the crisis: the “public” of public art is an ideological construction, an imagined community conjured into existence in order to satisfy the needs of particular interests. Today, public art is still firmly attached to the apparatus of redevelopment and must be placed within the context of the consumer-service landscape in order to be better understood. The most problematic issue within public art is its claim of “publicness” in the very first place. Often times, as Rosalyn Deutsche argues, public art is commissioned by private enterprise for a particular segment of the public—the professional class of the postindustrial city, those who really count. Deutsche is one of the few academics to place public art in an urban sociopolitical context and attempt a critical investigation of the term “public” as it relates to “art.”

As mentioned above, public art professionals have, until very recently, neglected to investigate the “public” in “public art.” Deutsche reminds us that status quo conceptions of public art derive “publicness” from considerations of the art’s location in outdoor urban areas—in so-called public spaces. The problem with this concept is that the public becomes essentialized as a physical or environmental construct rather than a mutable socio-political one. She argues that a truly public art cannot simply evolve from its location, but must come to fruition from the multiple intersections of personal and collective interests, social issues, and political events that constitute urban life (Deutsche 1996b).

Adding detail to Deutsche’s argument, Patricia Phillips claims that public space, the space that public art occupies, is really a euphemism used to describe the areas that developers have not utilized—those left over areas after commercial and residential space has been rented and/or sold. Public space thus serves the incentive not to be “public” but to satisfy market-driven objectives. The enlightened developer has discovered that public art can be profitable, and that offering art to the community can enhance the corporate image (Phillips 1988: 93). By evoking the public good and concretizing it in the form of art, redevelopment is able to mask and neutralize the interests of social groups that threaten the harmony that goes hand in hand with hegemonic

definitions of “public.” Thus, we need to come to terms with the fact that “public” is not a real category, but is always contested and fragmented. Shedding light on this argument, Craig Owens remarks, “‘The public’ is a discursive formation susceptible to appropriation by the most diverse—indeed, opposed—ideological interests” (Owens 1987: 18). Indeed, the term’s biggest pitfall is its claim to unity and harmony in the face of inevitable exclusion.

As a form of advanced capitalist urbanism, Deutsche argues, redevelopment serves the needs of the professional class who inhabit the postindustrial city. Public spaces such as parks are redeveloped to suit the desires and tastes of upper-echelon service economy workers; lower income people are not conceived as part of the design strategy. This perspective resonates with arguments put forth by Zukin, Boyer, and Sieber and resonates with aspects of the development plan for SRP as discussed in the previous chapter. According to Deutsche, we need to understand the redevelopment of contemporary urban spaces within the context of postindustrial society since redevelopment assists in facilitating the restructuring of the economy from one of production to one of consumption. Deutsche argues that the redevelopment of the financial sector in major cities such as New York during the 1980s, displaced residents and created homeless people—exiles of the service economy. Homeless people and the new “public” places are not distinct from one another other, but are rather dual products of the contemporary production of urban space (Deutsche 1996c: 279). Public art, as an aspect of redevelopment, seeks to produce the opposite impression. “Under several unifying banners—historical continuity, preservation of cultural tradition, civic beautification, utilitarianism—official public art collaborated with architecture and urban design to create an image of new urban sites that suppressed their conflictual character” (Deutsche 1996c: 279). According to Deutsche’s perspective, public art collaborates with gentrifying planning practices to make places appear more public than they actually are, acting as the public relations agent for redevelopment.

While Deutsche’s critique of public art and development strategies are specific to New York in the 1980s, they still elucidate issues involving SRP today. The northern, undeveloped section of SRP represents to some Philadelphians conflictual urban space. Here, amid the tangled brush and old concrete foundations of by-gone industry, is a world known as Gay Acres—a gay cruising area used by African American men. Residents in this section of the park allege drug dealing and late-night boisterous activity. To the south of Gay Acres in

the developed area of the park is Judy Garland Park—a subcultural designation bestowed upon SRP by a more white gay cruising public. In the early 1990s, the police arrested cruisers who violated the SRP’s 1 a.m. curfew, which precipitated protests from the gay community. Today, cruising still occurs, but a recent dog walking area has eradicated bushes and created more open space that, some argue, has made it more difficult for clandestine trysting, as mentioned in Chapter 2. While it is too early to tell what impact SRP’s new landscape design will have on the way gay men use the park, one can only imagine that the park’s development will suppress such activities. Thus, following Deutsche’s argument, the development of SRP, with its river esplanade and emphasis on open space, will potentially impinge on a particular public’s access to space, thereby evicting less “desirable” people from the park. In Chapter 5, I will explain the gay use of SRP in more detail.

Deutsche argues that public art’s discourse is inextricably linked to that of redevelopment: both are infused with the language of functionalism and essentialism. Just as urban spaces are endowed with a priori functions that deny social use (a train station is for transportation), public art must be functional as well. What became known as the “new public art” of the late 1980s, a terminology that art critics devised to label the public art of redeveloped New York, especially the Lower West Side’s Battery Park City, referred to a kind of art that had a purpose outside of aesthetics. One critic even hinted at public art’s divorce from not only aesthetic concerns but from social ones as well: “Use—not as in criticality but as in seating and tables, shade and sunlight—is a primary issue” (Nancy Pricenthal quoted in Deutsche 1996b: 65). The irony of the new public art was that it was heralded as site-specific, despite its inability to engage the political, social, and institutional contexts that were once the chief prerogatives of art’s site-specificity. Although this critical practice will be touched upon later, suffice it to say that the new public art, as critics like Deutsche argue, sanitizes site-specificity by envisioning public art as a means to make a site function according to deterministic notions of place, thus affirming space as given rather than contesting it. The new public art, therefore, has been interpreted as socially conscious because it provides public amenities, like seats and tables, for example, despite its often private ownership and actual exclusivity.

The “new public art” has had some impact on the discourse surrounding SRP’s public art process, but in terms of the proposed public art projects for the park, it has been insignificant. During meetings of the public art advisory committee, several advisors suggested that public art should be functional and could take the form

of lighting, seating, paving/walkways, or decorative elements that might embellish the bulkheads that retain the shoreline of the river. However, I do not think that the advisory committee, when selecting the semi-finalists, favored artistic functionalism. In fact, the artists eventually chosen propose projects that are only tangentially functional—they certainly do not prescribe essentialist conceptions of space in the vain that Deutsche describes above. As I will discuss detail in Chapter 6, Mierle Laderman Ukeles' proposal involves creating an open shelter with a trellis-like roof featuring colored glass lenses. The shelter is intended to be a meditative site honoring the ritualistic qualities of water. Ukeles will involve various religious communities from the Philadelphia area to describe their water rituals, which will be integrated as visual icons into the support structure. The project also recalls the 18th century-baptismal site that was once located on the eastern shore of the Schuylkill River, located in the vicinity of SRP. The other public art project proposed by the collaborative team of Stacy Levy and Winifred Lutz does embrace functionalism to some degree, but is more a site-specific work that explores the process of the river's hydraulic action. In *Confluences: The Flows of the Schuylkill*, the artists will construct a terraced inlet, in which the terraces double as seating, on a beach-like section of the riverbank. The piece will highlight, among other aspects of the river, the daily events of tidal change: at high tide, the terraced inlet nearly fills to the brim. While I will explore both projects in depth in Chapter 6, for now it is important to underscore that these projects do not assume a deterministic notion of space and offer the audience a multivalent experience based on the social and environmental context of the site. Despite shortcomings in exploring the idea of community during the SRP public art process and despite the landscape of consumption notion on which the development of the park is partially modeled, these public art projects are laudable and create a sense of hope for SRP. In Chapter 6, I will explain how SRP neighbors, although deploring the lack of communication on the part of SRDC and unsympathetic towards developing the park as a tourist destination, were still very supportive of the Levy and Lutz proposal.

Deutsche's critique of public art as an aspect of the city's infringement on the public's access to space is an important one. She ambitiously analyzes public art within spatial theory and argues that public art has taken a role alongside development in creating spaces which emphasize harmony and minimize contradiction. According to Deutsche, the "new public art," in relief to other forms of public art, such as modernist sculpture installed with no attention to context, is integrated with its surrounding space by making art that is human-scale

and, most importantly, useful. It is through the language of utility that exclusion takes place and by defining what is useful, developers, architects, and artists exclude the possibility of alternate uses. Deutsche argues that public art and development's appeal to the concept of usefulness divorces space from an integration with the myriad aspects of city life and the effects of development, including the displacement of less affluent residents, resulting in the disruption of communities and homelessness. The public art process as located within the context of development, if we extrapolate from Deutsche's argument, is a pasteurizing process.

"Pasteurization" implies removing harmful bacteria through a standardized process. In redevelopment, planners and designers similarly attempt to design places that will minimize the harmful elements in the urban environment such as crime, decay, and the appearance of a disenfranchised population. Public art assists in this process by producing environments that convey harmony, washing over conflict (Babon 2000: 116).

Since Deutsche originally wrote the essays from which most of this discussion draws from in the mid-late 1980s, one must keep in mind the moment that formulates her perspective. She relates changing planning priorities of that time period to a shift in the political power structure and socioeconomic complexion of New York under way since the fiscal crisis of the 1970s and the dissolution of liberal policy under the Reagan administration. The apex of class polarizing redevelopment, according to her point of view, was the creation of Battery Park City, in lower Manhattan. Battery Park City was conceived as a residential and corporate center where the finance capital elite could both live and work. The developers, with the assistance of the state, insured that all the proposed subsidized housing was eliminated from the site and transferred to the Bronx and Harlem. Expensive permanent public art installations were placed throughout the development, consecrating this very private space in the name of the public (Deutsche 1996b). We must take into consideration the era and the development context that shaped her views on public art and urban space. Thus, while she correctly takes into account the sociopolitical context of a particular kind of public art making, we must be careful to assume that all public art conspires to rob us of our right to public space. As will be argued shortly, there are other trends in public art that seek to investigate the concept of the public—not all public art serves private interests. As I pointed out above, the projects proposed for SRP not only stand in relief to the corporate art that Deutsche is so highly critical of, but also to some of the more problematic aspects of the postindustrial development process discussed in the previous chapter. Before examining trends in public art that postdate the time period in

which Deutsche's critique is situated, I return briefly to Deutsche, who offers us entry into the critique of Jürgen Habermas' formulation of the public sphere, an important exercise in understanding the complexities of the concept of public.

Theorizing the "Public" in "Public Art"

Deutsche keenly points out that another fatal flaw within public art is the understanding that controversy is something to avoid. Indeed, public space and democracy are usually seen as a priori consensus builders, community consolidators, and conflict soothers. Public space, public art, and democracy are viewed with certitude, fixed entities that somehow speak to universal city dwellers. Deutsche deconstructs the language utilized by Harriet Senie and Sally Webster's introduction to their edited volume *Critical Issues in Public Art* as symptomatic of the belief that public space and art are best conceived outside the realm of controversy. In their opening paragraph, the authors claim that "public art with its built-in social focus would seem to be an ideal genre for a democracy. Yet, since its inception, issues surrounding its appropriate form and placement, as well as its funding, have made public art an object of controversy more often than consensus or celebration" (Senie and Webster 1992: xi). According to Deutsche's analysis of these sentences, democracy and controversy are placed in opposition to each other. Deutsche argues that the authors assert that "Public art would be democratic *except* that it is controversial, or—in a more optimistic reading—public art retains its democratic potential *despite* the fact that it is controversial" (author's emphasis) (1996c: 282). For Senie and Webster, and by extension, much of public art discourse in general, controversy seems to be something public art should avoid, and is ultimately the enemy of democracy. This is misguided because perhaps the most important exchange between art world professionals, government bureaucrats, and "regular" people was the result of controversy—the *Tilted Arc* debacle. Thus, for many public art workers, consensus is the goal of democracy and a unified public sphere the ultimate audience for public art.

This conception of the public originates from Enlightenment political theory's search for unity and has been most articulately argued by the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas. Habermas' theorization of what he terms the bourgeois public sphere depends on the opposition of the public (the condition of democratic politics) and the private (the domains of family and the economy). The public sphere evolved with the advent of

bourgeois society, ushering in a strict division between public and private realms. In the safety of the private sphere, the property owning middle class could make their living free from state intrusion. Habermas' bourgeois public sphere is marked by activities that potentially are capable of challenging Church and State. These activities include writing, reading, and literary criticism and are institutionalized in salons, coffeehouses, book clubs, and the press. Such institutions paved the way for a political public sphere, "a forum of discursive interaction that was ostensibly open and accessible to all, where private citizens could discuss matters of public interest freely, rationally and as equals" (Hansen 1993: xxvii). For Habermas, the public sphere declined with the entry of non-bourgeois groups, the growth of mass media and the rise of the welfare state, thus eroding the boundaries between public and private life that are necessary for the conditions of the bourgeois public sphere's existence. Habermas' demand that the bourgeois public sphere be grounded in unity, that property owner equals human being, thus assumes that the bourgeois public sphere represents and speaks for everyone, and is thus based on exclusion and homogenization (Hansen 1993:xxvii; Deutsche 1996c: 287).

Habermas' work on the public sphere has precipitated much debate among scholars and a particularly strong critique has been waged by the German sociologist and filmmaker partnership of Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge in their seminal work *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*. According to their argument, the problems of the bourgeois public sphere do not simply surface with its decline in postmodernity, but inhere in the very constitution of that sphere (Hansen 1993:xxvii). While Habermas saw the public sphere as a space for rational people to engage in political dialogue, Negt and Kluge view the bourgeois public sphere as repressing debate. Repression originates in the division between private and public spheres. As Deutsche argues, "[b]ecause economic gain, protected from public accountability by its seclusion within the private domain, actually depends on publicly provided conditions, the bourgeois public sphere was instituted as a means for private interests to control public activity"(Deutsche 1996b: 58).

Habermas seemingly fails to highlight the exclusionary basis of a public sphere that claims to represent all of the public: that property ownership and a middle class position, certainly not the condition of all members of society, are prerequisites for entry into that public sphere. Habermas' bourgeois public sphere excludes substantial social groups such as workers, servants, women, and by extension people of color—all of

whom he ultimately views as threats to unity. Negt and Kluge counter Habermas by claiming any move to represent unity is exclusionary; the bourgeois public sphere is thus a pseudo-public sphere. Negt and Kluge expose this pseudo-public sphere as a site that is increasingly privately owned, determined by profit, and characterized by colonizing all aspects of life into objects of production. While Habermas sees the death and decay of the public sphere as a recent phenomenon and is thus in a state of mourning the loss of an ideal, Negt and Kluge see the bourgeois public sphere as inherently flawed. That today the public is viewed within the pseudo-public sphere as a mass of consumers and spectators is not very different from the Enlightenment bourgeois public sphere which saw the masses as unable to speak for themselves due to an array of flawed differences, whether it be gender, class, race, etc. While Habermas falls back on the “decline-of-modernity-equals-a-decline- of-civilization” argument that taints much of Frankfurt School social theory, of which he is indebted, Negt and Kluge envision the construction of an oppositional public sphere, that challenges the notion that homogenized unity equals public good.

The notion of enlightened, rational decision makers coming together to form a public sphere undoubtedly informed the SRP public art process. Granted, the public art advisory committee in which I participated was more open than Habermas’ bourgeois public sphere—African Americans and women were both invited to participate. However, the committee was still limited in its composition. The SRP public art committee represented the arts community—those enlightened enough to make decisions about public art. Little effort was made to explore the plurality of the concept “public” as no local community members were involved in the process. The idea that the bourgeois public sphere was instituted as a means for private interests to control public activity, as Deutsche claims above, is pertinent to the SRP public art process as well. John Randolph’s SRDC is a private, non-profit development corporation whose single task is to develop SRP. John Randolph has appointed himself the prime catalyst and overseer of that development. SRDC is not accountable to the local community despite the fact that Randolph himself is a member of the community adjacent to the park. Of course, much of the development process lies outside Randolph’s control (the selection of artists for public art and the projects that artists will install on the site; whether funders will provide money for development, for example), but Randolph’s self-appointed status as the “keeper of the Schuylkill River,” as one informant described him, raises important issues regarding the control of public space. According to park

neighbor, Bill Hostetter, “John Randolph’s operation is not a community-based operation, it is a one man show.” Hostetter argues that Randolph has not created a public for the development of the park: “There has been no community support for developing the rest of the park, the community has not been mobilized or asked for their input” (Hostetter 2000). These perspectives will be examined in detail in Chapters 5 and 6. SRP represents the increased blurriness between the public and private sectors that has evolved since the post-World War II period. As public money shrinks for the maintenance of cities, a kind of private economic “vigilanteism” has taken hold with the creation of Business Improvement Districts and private security forces to replace functions once provided by the public domain. Thus, with the small budget of the Fairmount Park Commission, SRDC may have little choice but to operate the developed park like a mall. Economic realities aside, it remains inexcusable to fail to make overtures to local residents in the development of a park in their neighborhood and argue that you are providing the public with a wonderful resource, as the rhetoric of SRDC has indicated.

If we implement the idea of Negt and Kluge's counter public sphere, or even take the best attributes of Habermas' concept of a bourgeois public sphere, which, despite its flaws, is still predicated on political discussion, we have a better model for a critical public art practice. Within the visual arts, critical practices exist, both in terms of art production and theory, that do not take constructing a public for granted. Since the 1960s, artists have challenged the idea of art's autonomy from institutional, social and political contexts. Critical site-specific art did something that autonomous modern art often failed to do: encourage the viewer to think about art's relationship to the lifeworld in which both the art and the viewer inhabit.

Craig Owens has been instrumental in theorizing critical site-specificity. In his essay “From Work to Frame, or is there Life After ‘The Death of the Author?’” he discusses the shift from work of art as solitary object to the institutions in which the work resides and comes to mean. Owens extrapolates on Barthes' notion of the death of the author and applies it to visual art. Owens writes:

Postmodernism approaches the empty space left by the author's disappearance from a different perspective, one which brings to light a number of questions that modernism, with its exclusive focus on the work of art and its ‘creator,’ either ignored or repressed: Where do exchanges between readers and viewers take place? Who is free to define, manipulate and ultimately benefit from the codes and conventions of cultural production? These questions shift attention away from the work and its producer and onto its *frame*—the first, by focusing on the *location* in which the work of art is encountered; the second, by insisting on the *social* nature of artistic production and reception (Owens 1992: 126).

Owens statement is ripe with pertinent critical criteria that can assist us in critiquing what passes for public art. Owens encourages us to understand that art is controlled by certain power interests and that it is deployed to protect those interests. In order for interests to be revealed as such, we must shift our inquiry away from the work and on to the location in which it is situated—the spaces where which we view art. Finally, we must realize that social conditions always mediate the creation of artwork and how that work is interpreted. Thus, Owens provides us with a critical lens in which to understand public art: we cannot examine it in a vacuum outside of the context of its *location* in the spatial politics of the postmodern city. He also reveals the social nature of art, in that the postmodern turn fosters “the birth of the viewer,” reinforcing the importance of audience in constructing meaning and, once again, revealing that art must rely on a public, constituted through social relations, to interpret the work. Owens also encourages us not only to think about this notion of location as a tool in which to gauge the social worth of art, but as a condition of artistic production itself—there is art out there that functions along these lines.

A corollary to Owens theory is that artistic production, reception and interpretation are contested terrains, hence, the public sphere is heterogeneous and fluid, never monolithic and static. Rosalyn Deutsche adds to this corollary. She insists that since art cannot assume a pre-existing public, but must help to produce one and that the public sphere is less a physical space than a practice, status quo public art is therefore problematized. Thus, accepted and simplistic divisions between public art (outdoor art) and private art (indoor art) are blurred. According to Rosalyn Deutsche, “Potentially, any exhibition venue is a public sphere and conversely, the location of artworks outside privately owned galleries, in parks and plazas, or simply outdoors, hardly guarantees that they will address a public” (Deutsche 1996b: 59). Good public art engages people in political discussion or fosters entry into a political struggle. Deutsche writes elsewhere: “Since any site has the potential to be transformed into a public space or, for that matter, a private space, public art can be viewed as an instrument that either helps produce a public space or questions a dominated space that has been officially ordained as public” (Deutsche 1996c: 288). Lucy Lippard clarifies the heady theory of Deutsche:

As the eighties end, a crosscultural, crossdisciplinary trend that began on the mainstream margins a decade ago seems to be gaining momentum. The relationship between art and environment, art and context, artist and audience remains at the heart of any public art that’s worth its turf . . . The real challenge lies outside conventional venues—not only outside

museum gardens, but outside of bank plazas and civic spaces . . . sometimes the exchanges take place in (gasp) a gallery or even a museum (Lippard 1989).

Recently, public art practitioners have made attempts at self-reflection, have engaged nagging questions regarding its status as a discipline, and have offered new visions of public art. If we investigate the language of NEA's Art in Public Places guidelines, as Suzanne Lacy suggests, the language reveals how attitudes toward the "public" in "public art" have changed over time (Art in Public Places quotations from Lacy 1995: 22-24). In 1967, the guidelines stated that the organization's goal was "to give the public access to the best art of our time outside museum walls." Here, the public is not even addressed. The statement assumes that the quality of an artwork is something that people will readily agree upon and that art which succeeds in a museum will succeed on the street. In 1974, the guidelines insist that art must be "appropriate to the immediate site," echoing the art world vogue for site-specific art. Again, no actual delineation of the public art audience at this time. By 1979, the NEA requested "methods to insure an informed community response to the project," ushering in the recognition of a community for public art. As time goes on, the language regarding community involvement becomes even stronger. In 1983, grant recipients were required to submit "plans for community involvement, preparation, and dialogue," which by the early 1990s, were expanded to include "educational activities which invite community involvement."

With the institutionalization of multiculturalism and identity politics in the late 1980s-early 1990s, came the practice of stressing and investigating the concept of "public" in public art. Suzanne Lacy, editor of *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, distinguishes public art of the recent past based purely on aesthetics rather than site-specificity or an examination of audience from "new genre public art," which adopts public as its "operative concept and quest" (Lacy 1995: 20). Thus, and I say this again, it is an overgeneralization to claim that all public art serves the interests of private redevelopment firms. Some of the most interesting public art projects are not attached to percent-for-art ordinances, but work independently of redevelopment in order to investigate concepts of community and public.

Within the last five years, the "public" in public art has come under scrutiny and is beginning to be conceived more as a negotiation dependent on a community's definition of itself rather than a static and monolithic concept applied from without as if to designate an essentialist ideal. Public art is now understood by some in terms of a process in which artists and a participatory audience come together in constructing a public.

Artists are more social activists catalyzing communities than creators of art objects, or instruments of development corporations. Mary Jane Jacob, an independent curator and director of the Chicago public art community project “Culture in Action” asks a question that public art of the last twenty years has neglected to ask: “But what if the audience for art (who they are and what their relationship with the work might be) were considered as the goal at the center of art production, at the point of conception, as opposed to the modernist aim of self-expression?” (Jacob quoted in Lacy 1995:50). It is this idea of building bridges between artists and communities from which the “newest” form of public art departs.

So-called “new genre public art” resulted from a pronouncement of activist contemporary art in the late 1980s. Postmodernism’s critique of art world institutions (the museum, the gallery system, the art market) served as a catalyst for artists to re-think the apparatus in which they were, as it appeared, inextricably a part. Socially and politically active artists came to realize that the art world was too insular a place for life-affecting discourses to evolve. Public art, not confined to the museum or gallery space and the attendant audience, offered a direct route out of insularity and into the public domain. Artists began to use audiences as collaborators in the process of making art. According to Mary Jane Jacob:

This work changed the definition of art as we have known it in this century by bringing the community into the creative process as coauthor, rejecting the modernist notion of the artist as sole heroic artistic genius, and returning art to its communal origins (Jacob 1995b: 56).

The landmark exhibition “Culture in Action” brought activist artists into direct partnership with community members who had little if any contact with contemporary art and attempted to expand the role of audience from spectator to participant. Each artist created innovative artworks, programs, and events around the city of Chicago dealing with urban issues such as youth leadership and gang violence, HIV/AIDS caregiving, public housing, multicultural demographics and neighborhoods, achievements by women, labor and management relations, and ecology—issues of direct concern to collaborating communities. These partnerships produced results as diverse as a storefront hydroponic garden, a new line of candy produced by union laborers, a new line of house paint colors developed by public housing residents, and an ecological field station. I will explain one project in detail, below.

The artists Kate Ericson and Mel Ziegler often address the idea of home as subject in their work and have used peoples’ private homes as sites for their analysis of social concerns. In their “Culture in

Action” project they utilized what they argued as a trope of the American dream, the paint chart. According to the artists, house paints and their packaging, particularly groupings of paint colors in thematic charts, were “subtle forms of propaganda” (Ericson and Ziegler quoted in Jacob 1995a: 123). Commercially available in hardware and paint stores, these color charts allow consumers to transform their homes into mansions, colonial homesteads or other romantic images evoked by paint colors and names. Sherman Williams, for example, has designed an entire line of Colonial Williamsburg paint so people can authentically replicate a colonial quaintness. Paint charts are usually marketed to middle class consumers, those who paint their own homes. Ericson and Ziegler wanted to create a paint chart whose color, text, and design would reflect a different sensibility—that of the public housing resident. In order to do this, they worked in collaboration with Ogden Court tenants, a Chicago public housing project.

Many of the apartments in Ogden Courts were painted once, over 20 years ago. Tenants have asked the Chicago Housing Authority to repaint their dwellings as peeling paint is not only an aesthetic problem, but a health hazard as well. Ericson and Ziegler designed their project around the idea of paint because they surmised that neglected paint jobs signified neglected people. There are plans to make the paint charts available in True Value Hardware stores across the country, lessening the gap between race and class by enlarging the chart’s audience and making life in the projects more widely known. If the chart becomes available in paint stores, it will be possible to order by names on the chart such colors as “Slum Clearance” or “Robert Taylor Monolith,” which matches the brick of one of Chicago’s largest and most dangerous housing projects.

While a project such as this one certainly takes into consideration the formation of a public throughout the creative process and signifies an important departure from the more static, sculpture-based conception of public art, good intentions need to be examined and challenged as well. Critics have questioned the community-based public art model for its opportunistic involvement of individuals in order to produce work with little lasting significance for the community that employs it. Critics Miwon Kwon writes:

. . . salutary efforts are being made to ‘democratize’ art—to engage and enlighten a broader audience, to give voice to marginalized groups thus far excluded or silenced in dominant cultural discourses . . . But in recent years, such efforts have also become formulaic: artist + community + social issue = new (public/critical) art . . . In turn, these

'communities,' identified as targets for collaboration in which members will perform as subjects and co-producers for their own appropriation, are often conceived as ready-made and fixed entities rather than multiple and fluid. The result is an artificial categorization of peoples and their reasons for coming together (Kwon quoted in Phillips 1998: 21).

Furthermore, community-based public art projects, like those in "Culture in Action" or Mary Jane Jacob's earlier effort, "Places with a Past," which took place in Charleston, South Carolina, and examined race relations through site-specific art, may intimate a variation on a theme of art-as-urban-development, where art is intended to ultimately attract a well-heeled crowd willing to spend money in the city—a form of art world tourism. "Places with a Past" aimed particularly to examine the uniqueness of Charleston through site-specific public art. Kwon warns us that perhaps well-intentioned public art exhibitions, such as this one,

ultimately do not veer very far from those of the city officials and cultural leaders of Grand Rapids, Michigan [sponsors of Calder's *La Grande Vitesse*, discussed previously] thirty years ago. For despite the tremendous difference in the art of choice . . . their investment in generating a sense of uniqueness and authenticity for their respective places of presentation remains quite consistent. As such, endeavors to engage art in the nurturing of specificities of locational difference gather momentum, there is a greater and greater urgency in distinguishing between the *cultivation* of art and places, and their *appropriation* for the promotion of cities as cultural commodities (author's emphasis) (Kwon quoted in Finkelppearl 2000: 41).

In a sense, then, Kwon argues that even temporary, politically motivated public art can be used for the same urban development goals that Deutsche, for example, so vehemently argues against. Thus, even this brand of public art has similar goals of the original percent-for-art programs: "to attract people to the city, to infuse a site with the sense of uniqueness that any proper 'destination' needs" (Finkelppearl 2000: 41).

Philadelphia's Fairmount Park Art Association has recently initiated its own attempt at creating new genre public art. "New Land Marks: Public Art, Community, and the Meaning of Place," is the umbrella title for a wide variety of community initiated public art projects. In an unusual public art selection process, both artists and communities were invited to apply for fifteen available projects (which was later enlarged to eighteen); communities and artists were "matched" by the Art Association staff given respective interests, strengths, needs, etc. In the two month period before the deadline, twenty-one presentations took place in various neighborhoods throughout the city informing interested applicants about the parameters of the program and the application and selection process. Community selection criteria were based on a willingness to explore unknown territory; a commitment to working with an artist in a

purposeful relationship that supports creative thought and action; the potential to integrate the artistic process into ongoing community development plans; and evidence of community representation and cooperation. Artist applicants were selected on the basis of their previous work, their willingness to participate in the community planning process, and opportunities for their ongoing interests and work to be extended to the community setting (Fairmount Park Art Association 1997: 4).

The administering organization, the Fairmount Park Art Association, has been dedicated to commissioning public art in Philadelphia for over a century. Initially responsible for erecting public monuments in Fairmount Park, the group's focus later expanded to all of Philadelphia. The Art Association has also been responsible for projects of great breadth, commissioning the initial design that resulted in the Benjamin Franklin Parkway. However, the organization is not known for playing the role as advocate for Philadelphia's poorer communities or exploring identity politics, although a project called "Form and Function," initiated in 1980, came closest in terms of community collaborative public art. In a project for Fairhill Park, located at 5th Street and Lehigh Avenue in North Philadelphia, the Art Association commissioned an artist to work with neighborhood residents in designing art to adorn public restrooms on the site. Despite hopes that public art could serve the purpose as a rallying point for community development, Fairhill Park and the surrounding neighborhood continued to decline. Recently, however, the Friends of Fairhill Park were chosen by the Art Association to participate in the "New Land Marks" program (Brown and Lotozo 1999: 31-32).

"New Land Mark's" definition of community goes beyond geography and includes groups bound together by shared interests or identity. For example, the Friends of the Japanese House and Garden partnered with Philadelphia artist Mei-Ling Hom to design an amphitheater and sculpture for the Fairmount Park site. The gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered community was paired with the artist Ap Gorny, who will be creating an installation at the William Way Community Center. The Vietnamese United National Association is working in collaboration with Darlene Nguyen Ely, who is designing a monument commemorating Vietnamese emigration for a Penn's Landing site on the Delaware River waterfront. Congreso de Latinos Unidos is proposing to incorporate an archival photographic installation by Pepon Osario into its new North Philadelphia building (Brown and Lotozo 1999). The Art Association even encouraged the skateboard community to apply, which was not selected.

Geographically defined communities were also among those chosen from the total of thirty-five applications. These included Allegheny West, represented by a community development organization from this North Philadelphia neighborhood; the Graduate Hospital neighborhood, also called Southwest Center City or South of South; Mill Creek, in West Philadelphia; as well as Fishtown and Kensington. Some projects propose monument-style public art, while others engage more process-oriented, community collaborative projects. For example, Rick Lowe, in collaboration with the Mill Creek Artists Collaborative, proposes to transform a vacant trash strewn and drug infested block of May Street, West Philadelphia, into an ongoing, multiphase, environmental public art project that would include a community art and activity center, housing, as well art installations and other amenities. In a project in Houston, Texas, *Project Row Home*, Lowe involved artists and community members in revitalizing abandoned row houses through a hybrid form of public art, community development, historic preservation, and youth education (Fairmount Park Art Association 1999: 4). As is often the case in public art, budgets and time lines for completing the projects are still vague. While the Art Association believed it would be able to commission three to five projects in 1999, groundbreaking has yet to begin, and commissions may not be announced until next year. In the meantime, the Art Association has launched a preview exhibition series, showcasing the proposals for each project.

There are strengths and weaknesses to “New Land Marks” approach to community initiated public art. At its best, the program offers hope that communities and artists working collaboratively can transform urban spaces creating meaningful art that bridges the divide between art and audience. There is also the hope that, in the cases of poorer communities, art will serve as one aspect of community development, whereby art contributes to a sense of community and in turn creates a better environment for neighborhood economic growth. But there are potential problems. Despite the ambitions of the program to bring artists and communities together, community voices were still left out of the planning process in some instances. “New Land Marks” also raises the issue of whether its goals can be achieved in communities where poverty and urban blight are structural problems (Brown and Lotozo 1999: 30).

There have already been problems in the relationship between artists and communities, precipitated by mismatches on the part of the Art Association. Issues point to the difficulty in uniting artists, often accustomed to having creative control over projects, with communities, who have their own needs. In one “New Land

Marks” proposal, the Frankford Avenue Coalition, an umbrella group composed of Kensington and Fishtown civic associations and social services organizations, proposed the creation of a gateway at two sites along Frankford Avenue, which would serve as entry points into the community. The group was matched with sculptor Phoebe Adams and poet Daisy Fried. According to one representative of the Frankford Avenue coalition, the match from the very beginning was incompatible since the art was very abstract and the down-to-earth blue collar community did not understand this kind of art. Furthermore, despite the intentions of the program, the matching process did not foster dialogue between artists and communities. The artists did not seek community input in the development of their proposal. Similarly, the sculptor Todd Noe was paired with an informal group that had been collecting objects relating to Kensington history and who wanted to memorialize local achievements through some kind of monument. Members of the group passed on to Noe a number of different artifacts that Noe could use for inspiration in creating a proposal. Noe did not respond to phone calls or emails from community representatives. By the time Noe developed sketches paying homage to the departed industries of Kensington, it was too close to deadline for community approval, so the community withdrew from the process (Brown and Lotozo 1999: 32). Problems seem inevitable when artists who lack experience working with communities are invited to do projects that require collaborative skills. That is why curators, such as Mary Jane Jacob, who organized “Culture in Action,” commission artists who have previously worked with communities and appear committed to continuing this line of endeavor. In the case of SRP’s public art process, while community involvement in the artist selection process was negligible, since the audience for public art in the park was never adequately framed, one of the artists selected for the projects has extensive experience in the community collaboration process.

From the discussion I have presented in this chapter, it appears public art serves two functions: 1) a symbolic sanctification of a site as “public,” when, in fact, claims to publicness are suspect for a variety of reasons; 2) a moral imperative to enlighten, or make viewers better people, through democratic participation in the selection process and/or through objects and images that are in some way educational and uplifting. These functions are not antipodal and are not mutually exclusive. Thus, public art in Schuylkill River Park falls somewhere in between the polar extremes of the “private” public art of redevelopment and the community initiated projects of “Culture in Action” and “New Land Marks.” The organization overseeing the development

of the park, the Schuylkill River Development Council (SRDC), is not a development firm seeking financial gain through the construction of commercial properties. It is a non-profit corporation which seeks to guide the development of land along the Schuylkill River banks. Although there has been evidence of a more commercially oriented development scenario, it is difficult to speculate on how the park will be developed and what the outcome of public art will be. Public art in the park is not sanctioned by percent-for-art ordinances, but, rather, by the civic benevolence of SRDC.

However, Deutsche's arguments still resonate in terms of SRP. In the most generalized sense, Deutsche highlights the relationship of the production of urban space with the production of public art, contextualizing public art within urban redevelopment strategies. One of the aims of this dissertation is to situate public art within discussions on urban space and posits that one cannot talk about public art without talking about the city's development and built environment. Deutsche, and thinkers like Craig Owens, provide entry into the important discussion of the "public" in "public art." They show us that "public" is an inherently complex term that cannot be conceived as a given, but as a problem that needs to be investigated—both as a term imbued with the ideological interests of those who deploy it (those overseeing development and public art), as well as a category with consequences in reality, reflecting the beliefs of "real" people. Moreover, Deutsche argues that the public cannot be formulated on geographical terms alone, and needs to be understood as a mutable sociopolitical category. As I will argue in Chapter 6, a flaw of the development and public art process of SRP was the underexploration of community. Building on the ideas proposed by Deutsche and others in this chapter, I offer an ethnographic exploration of the different community interests of the SRP neighborhood, as well as a projection regarding the imagined communities that the SRDC sees as the users of the park.

While the public art process in SRP may have neglected to fully conceive community, the artists who were selected propose promising projects. One of these artists, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, is known for her attention to the community art process, and the other two artists, Stacy Levy and Winifred Lutz, working in collaboration, are highly attuned to the natural environment and are known for site-specific projects that investigate natural processes and are ecologically sensitive. All of these artists have been lauded for their ability to educate audiences about environmental issues, and, in Ukeles' case, an attention to class inequities in

the work place, the politics of motherhood, among other socio-political artistic explorations. Finally, since the final outcome of public art remains to be seen, it is important that we do not force a conspiratorial interpretation on the public art in SRP, despite Deutsche's valid critique. Those involved in the public art process are not the dupes of development, and nor are the artists selected. All are individuals with agency who shaped a particular process. Despite problems fostered in the lack of commitment in ascertaining community, the public art selection committee for SRP carefully selected interesting artists from a pool of applicants—artists who have strong records in site-specific environmentally conscious art and community involvement. Thus, while the community may have been ignored in selecting the art for the park, the artists' methodologies used in the creation of their work may precipitate community involvement after all.

Before examining the SRP site, its historical and contemporary development, and the public art process, further context will be provided on the history of the built environment in Philadelphia, as well as locating public art and prominent development projects within this narrative. The following chapter will also examine Philadelphia's attempts at economically redefining itself in the wake of industrial decline, paying attention to how this redefinition affects the built environment, and, thus, provides us with a context for understanding the ways in which development may occur in SRP.