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Device to Solve a Controversy: Public Art and Public Places

Caitlin Crombleholme

It is made of galvanized structural steel, anodized perforated aluminum, and red transparent Venetian glass. It stands twenty-two feet high, eighteen feet long, and nine feet across. It is a New England-style church, upside-down, with its steeple thrust into the ground. It is a sculpture called “Device to Root Out Evil,” by the New York-based artist Dennis Oppenheim. The piece, originally titled “Church,” was proposed to the Public Art Fund in 1996 to be built in New York City (Thea). Ever since its creation, the mammoth sculpture has failed to find a welcoming home, facing controversial opposition and protest. Both New York City and Stanford have refused to display the piece. It found sanctuary in Vancouver, Canada, but it was moved not even three years later to another location. The chapel has been in, what Canadian journalist Rod Mickleburgh coined “artistic purgatory” for over ten years (Mickleburgh). Oppenheim’s piece serves as a manifestation of public art’s issues. Is there a place for public art, or is it destined to drift indefinitely? Can public art ever find acceptance, or must it be condemned for the remotest controversial insinuation?

Dennis Oppenheim first made his mark on the artistic scene in the late 1960’s. He was considered radical at the time, pioneering bizarre forms of land art, body art, video and sculpture. Michael Kimmelman, an art critic for *The New York Times*, wrote in a review of Oppenheim’s work that “he was moving out of the galleries and into the world, rejecting the precious art object, which was of course a way to make galleries and critics pay attention” (Kimmelman). In an interview with Alanna Heiss, a curator friend, Oppenheim said, “My work comes from an idea, and therein lies its conceptual aspect...Much of my work comes from the ‘eye of the gut.’ It’s not mental, not visual, but somewhere in between” (Heiss 137). Oppenheim does not let mainstream views direct his work. Oftentimes he directs his work in the opposite direction, such as his “Earth Art,” which took art off of gallery walls.

He began his career with “Earth Art,” a site-specific visual to apply “abstract gestures” into the land (Heiss 138). “Annual Rings,” one of his earliest pieces in 1968, took place at the United States-Canadian border in Maine. He shoveled rings into the snow-covered ground, much like the age rings on trees, severed down the middle by a river. Oppenheim’s Earth Art is recorded with limited documentation like photographs. “Many of my Earth Art pieces were supposed to vanish,” he said, reasoning that it is not reductive, “it’s simply that you are practicing what you preach” (Heiss 144). No matter how ephemeral his artwork may be, Oppenheim sustains an unusual edge. For example, when he transitioned into Body Art in the 1970’s, Oppenheim sat for five hours in the sun with a book on his chest for “Reading Position for Second Degree Burn,” which is a photograph of his tan line. Over the past two decades, Oppenheim has continued his unique art form, focusing mainly on conceptual sculptures and room installations. Kimmelman noted that he “has to rely on aesthetic indifference as a kind of political strategy, an anti-art pose, tough to sustain over decades” (Kimmelman). But he has

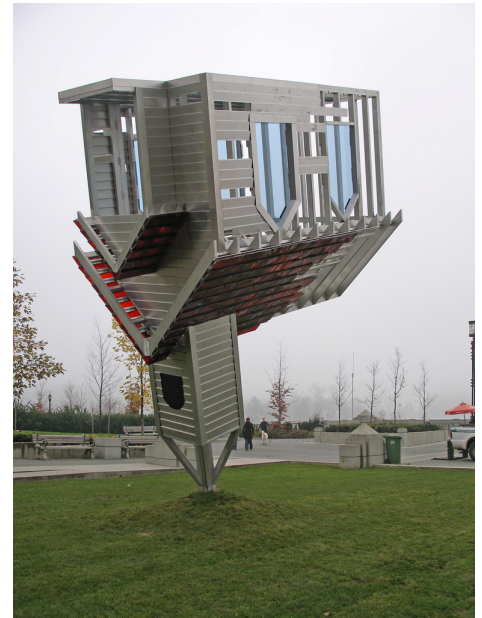


Fig. 1 *Device to Root out Evil*, 2006 in Harbor Green Park, Vancouver. Source: Oppenheim.

remained a popular and sought-after artist for nearly forty years. He was a harbinger of contemporary art when he first started. His relationship to young artists who also use unconventional styles has preserved his appeal. In regards to his work, Oppenheim claims he does not aim for a specific audience. “The context [of audience] seems to be extremely pertinent to some artists in terms of their entry, in terms of their content, in terms of their substance. I’ve had difficulty even conjuring any sense of a target,” he said (Heiss 151). Still, Oppenheim disturbs you, makes you laugh or gets under your skin because it is vital for his art to succeed.

Perhaps it was in this mindset Oppenheim produced “Device to Root Out Evil,” hoping to stir up religious upset and indignation, although he argues that the piece has no anti-religious meaning behind it. The sculpture’s first title was “Church,” to be built on Church Street, where the artist lives. But when the director of the Public Art Fund in New York City rejected it for its potentially controversial implications, Oppenheim changed the name in order to “sidestep unwanted focus on ambient content” (Thea). A year later, it was put on display at the Venice Biennale of 1997 where Oppenheim had an entire exhibit in Marghera, a division of Venice. “Device to Root Out Evil” was his only outdoor and most widely acclaimed piece.

In 2004 Oppenheim arranged to donate the sculpture to his alma mater, Stanford University. The museum’s director, Tim Seligman, and an art panel comprised of professors, students, and professional artists, had agreed to it. But Stanford’s president John Hennessy rejected it because of its religious imagery. “I conceived of it as architecture,” Oppenheim told *The New York Times* in an interview at the time, “Simply by turning the church upside down it rendered it nonfunctional. Therefore it approaches what we usually consider a sculpture – a sculpture being a nonfunctional object” (Blum). Oppenheim strongly emphasized the nature of the piece as a sculpture, as an art object, not as an object of religious blasphemy. In another interview with curator Carolee Thea, he said that “one is always looking for a basic gesture in sculpture... Turning something upside-down elicits a reversal of content and pointing a steeple into the ground directs it to hell as opposed to heaven” (Thea). No matter what arguments Oppenheim makes about “Device” being a purely artistic object, it still receives criticism as an offensive, controversial piece and is forced to move from place to place. Many question whether “Device,” or any sculpture for that matter, has the potential to be accepted in one location. A community must embrace the sculpture, but how that is to be accomplished depends largely on the funding of the piece. As art history professors Harriet Senie and Sally Webster point out, “Private patronage of public art presents a complex range of problems” (Senie 103).

Unlike most pieces of public art, “Device” was not commissioned and its site-specific location (Church Street) became secondary when it was declined. Consequently, it has been privately funded for the past twelve years. In the second attempt to plant “Device” somewhere, Oppenheim was willing to give his sculpture for free to Stanford University. In this case, the university made the choice of accepting a piece and having a private fund cover the cost of installation. However, the university’s president had an overriding veto. “I think the president made a mistake by selecting an art committee, and then rejecting their choice. Of course any artist who has his work rejected thinks it’s a mistake,” Oppenheim said later (Blum). But he offers a valid point. Who should be responsible for making choices about public art? Stanford president John Hennessy had given authority to the museum’s director and art panel, all of whom were appointed by the president for their positions. But then Hennessy recanted that trust, superseding the goal of the university’s Outdoor Art Panel to “further develop the excellent collection of sculpture from the modern era [and]...to serve as a primary source for the aesthetic education of the Stanford community” (“Charge”). Art in the public domain is part of what Senie

and Webster call a “complex matrix where personal ambitions as well as larger political and economic agendas often merge” (Senie 101). Hennessy was motivated by the threat of possible controversy, of the potential “emotional impact on the community” (Blum). Did Hennessy decide for the sake of the community, or did he decide for the sake of his job? While he took the public’s reaction into consideration, Hennessy was acting to protect himself from political dispute and negative attention. The “aesthetic education” of the Stanford community was secondary. The public reaction to the sculpture could have cost Hennessy his career, so better risk Oppenheim’s than his.

Though the piece was not warmly received in the United States, it was more widely accepted in Canada. It may not have been accepted, however, had it not been for a public sculpture exhibit that began in Vancouver in 2006. Barrie Mowat, a local art dealer in Vancouver, developed the initiative with the Vancouver Parks Board to fund a summer public art exhibition on a bi-annual basis called the Vancouver Sculpture Biennale. Writer for the Canadian *National Post* Brian Hutchinson wrote that the biennale “is meant to be a showcase of international-caliber work” with an original budget of \$2-million that was privately raised (Hutchinson). Hutchinson also wrote about the first abrupt, unannounced organization of the biennale. The sculptures arrived “with no fanfare and no explanation,” placed in prominent positions along the waterfront (Hutchinson). Twenty-two large pieces of sculpture began to pop up around the city in the summer of 2006 with two pieces by Dennis Oppenheim. The other piece, entitled “Engagement,” featured two rings rising nearly thirty feet. Sitting on top where the diamonds would traditionally be are two translucent houses. This sculpture was secondary to Oppenheim’s “Device,” which was the signature piece of the biennale. The sculptures were supposed to be replaced in subsequent years by other works of art, but “Device” was sold at auction that year to the private Benefic Foundation of Vancouver to remain in the city (Mickleburgh). Michella Frosch, the chairwoman of the Vancouver biennale’s management board said that, ““Device to Root Out Evil” is stirring up conversation and creating dialogue” (Hutchinson). But the biggest controversy over the piece, unfortunately, was not the “healthy” discussion the piece supposedly prompted, but the choice of location. The church’s steeple was shoved into the lush green grass of Harbor Green Park. “A number of irate Vancouver condo-dwellers have grouched that certain sculptures in the exhibit are blocking their views,” Hutchinson wrote of the biennale’s unsuitable arrangements, “In Vancouver, that’s a serious charge. Views are to die for and bad people sometimes poison trees here, just to have unobstructed looks at the sea” (Hutchinson). In the end it was scenery, not sacrilege, that forced the Vancouver Park Board commissioners to vote unanimously on the piece’s removal two and a half years later. Since its removal in 2008, “Device” has been moved to an inner-city development in Calgary. “I don’t think we are yet prepared for this level of art. Very clearly, it does create debate and dialogue, but that’s good. It helps humanize Vancouver,” Frosch said in a later interview (Mickleburgh). Vancouver was not prepared for “this level of art” because the biennale committee did not prepare for the community reaction. As Hutchinson said, the sculpture biennale was not made known to the city’s inhabitants. And though the Vancouver Parks Board took advantage of its prime locations for the sculptures, they failed to consider the people and the views it would implicate. John Hennessy disregarded the sculpture and public art’s purpose for the consideration of the public whereas Vancouver Sculpture Biennale disregarded their public and audience for the consideration of art for art’s sake.

Michael Kammen, a professor of American cultural history at Cornell University, analyzed the history and function of public art in his book *Visual Shock*. He contends that public

art is only successful when the community is involved in the decision-making process. “Failure to consult with host communities in a serious and sustained manner, mostly about subject matter, has been the single most serious difficulty” with outdoor art installations, he writes (Kammen 214). In regards to Oppenheim’s piece, Kammen would say that the elites should not have bought the piece without careful community input. A community with little exposure to abstract art requires a sizeable amount of preparation and introduction. The biennale in Vancouver began suddenly; the community was not aware that the sculptures were arriving. This is what Kammen calls “plop art,” meaning “sculptural monoliths placed in front of buildings with no thought to the relationship between the two or their impact on the public” (Kammen 245). “Device” was moved because it blocked residents’ view, inconveniently plopped in the middle of a park with a spectacular view in the middle of a city. “The site is too close to condominium towers, and the pocket park is too small for such a large sculpture,” said Ian Robertson, the vice-chairman of the Park Board that voted on the piece’s removal, “It’s a controversial piece, and it’s in people’s front yards. They can’t escape it” (Mickleburgh). Although the Benefic Foundation believed they were enabling the Vancouver Sculpture Biennale “to accomplish its noble and compassionate visions,” it disregarded the community it serves (Benefic).

Jeffery Spalding, president and CEO of the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, was among the many who attended meetings with the city, stakeholders, and public art advocates to determine where “Device” should go after Vancouver. The Benefic Foundation lent the piece to his museum where it intends to stay for five years (Lederman). Spalding had been hoping to find a way to revitalize the city and he stated that the Glenbow Museum “has always been the artistic heartland of Calgary...It’s where artists and arts people live. It’s a community and it’s the heartbeat, the soul of the place” (Lederman). Still, the biggest concern for the move was whether the sculpture would continue to be followed by debate and controversy. Spalding argued that it is to be expected: “The Glenbow [has] re-engaged with arts renewal...Art for centuries has been a mechanism for discussion...There’s always been debate” (Lederman).

To be sure, Oppenheim’s “Device” serves as a testament of the complications and controversies of public art. The next four years of the sculpture’s lease will prove whether or not such art can have a sustained place in society, and whether or not Calgary is really the flourishing artistic metropolis Spalding claims it to be. The decision to move the piece to Calgary was made, as Spalding said, by the city, stakeholders, and public art advocates. Will that be enough? Will the audience be as welcoming to the piece as the elite artistic community? Although the committee consisted of community members, they may not have necessarily voiced the same opinions of the community as a whole. And there could potentially be another episode like that at Stanford where the group decision is overruled by a powerful head – perhaps by Jeff Spalding. Or an episode like in Vancouver where the public does not like the piece at all. Kammen proposes two possible outcomes of such a situation. One result where the piece is the center of disagreement and debate and one where “public art projects are not only accepted after a few years but come to be taken for granted” (Kammen 214). With controversy and debate, the piece remains alive, significant, susceptible, and is possibly threatened with removal. With acceptance, the piece becomes recognized, understated, ordinary, and is possibly threatened with blending into the background. The purpose of public art is imprecise and depends chiefly on the public who decides what art is.

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