

CRITICAL  
ISSUES  
IN  
PUBLIC  
ART

—  
CONTENT,  
CONTEXT,  
AND  
CONTROVERSY

Chapter 16- Baboons, Pet Rocks, and Bomb Threats

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## *Baboons, Pet Rocks, and Bomb Threats*

### *Public Art and Public Perception*

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The “Chicago Picasso,” the sculpture that signaled the revival of public art that began in the late 1960s, is frequently compared to a baboon or an Afghan (the dog, not the blanket). In Seattle two very different sculptures (Isamu Noguchi’s *Landscape of Time* and Michael Heizer’s *Adjacent, Against, Upon*) were, at the time of their installation, related to the then popular “pet rock” craze.<sup>1</sup> And two even more radically different works (George Sugarman’s *Baltimore Federal* and Richard Serra’s *Tilted Arc*) were perceived as physically dangerous, likely to inspire bomb throwers and rapists.

Such public responses to public art are consistently elicited and gleefully reported in the popular press and on the nightly news. After all, they constitute a human interest story—always good for a laugh, and always bad for art. The public derides art, and the art community bemoans the ignorance of the public. Time and time again well-meaning individuals (local officials, public art administrators, and artists) involved with a public art commission are shocked that their carefully considered project is so glaringly misunderstood. Hands are wrung, wounds are licked, participants commiserate, the public laments, and yet another opportunity for dialogue and understanding is lost. Underneath the comical comparisons, disparagements of monetary worth, and expressions of anxiety lies a core of expectations for art in our society, and particularly for public art imposed on a communal space. These are the expectations that must be addressed if public art is to communicate with its intended audience.

When William Hartmann, an architect at Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, initiated and pursued the commission of a Picasso sculpture for Chi-



Pablo Picasso, "Chicago Picasso," 1967, Chicago Civic Center. (Photo: Burt Roberts)

cago's Civic Center, he stated simply: "We wanted the sculpture to be the work of the greatest artist alive."<sup>2</sup> In 1963, when the sculpture commission was initiated, Picasso was indeed the most famous living artist, yet he had never had a monumental sculpture built, hated commissions, and had never been to Chicago. Hartmann's concerns were those of an art collector steeped in the tradition of Western European art—one that placed art before the public and expected appropriate approval and appreciation. After much cajoling, Picasso produced a maquette for a signature piece, a Cubist-derived abstract image conflating his wife and pet dog.<sup>3</sup> At its unveiling, members of the general public reportedly compared it to, among other things, "a baboon, bird, phoenix, horse, sea horse, Afghan hound, nun, Barbra Streisand, and a viking helmet."<sup>4</sup> Jokes persisted, but the sculpture was not subject to the art analysis common to Picasso's much interpreted museum works.

What might be deemed the sculpture's success as public art was the result of Mayor Richard J. Daley's public support and a good public relations campaign. For the first few years of its existence, on the anniversary of its installation, birthday celebrations were held in the plaza, complete with cakes provided by a local advertising agency. After a winning season, the sculpture may sport a Chicago Cubs' baseball cap or a Bears' headband. At the time of Mayor Daley's death in 1976 one cartoonist portrayed the sculpture shedding a tear. Gradually Picasso's untitled sculpture became the "Chicago Picasso," in name and in fact. What was obscured in the process was the actual content of the piece. What was affirmed was the unstated intention of the patrons.

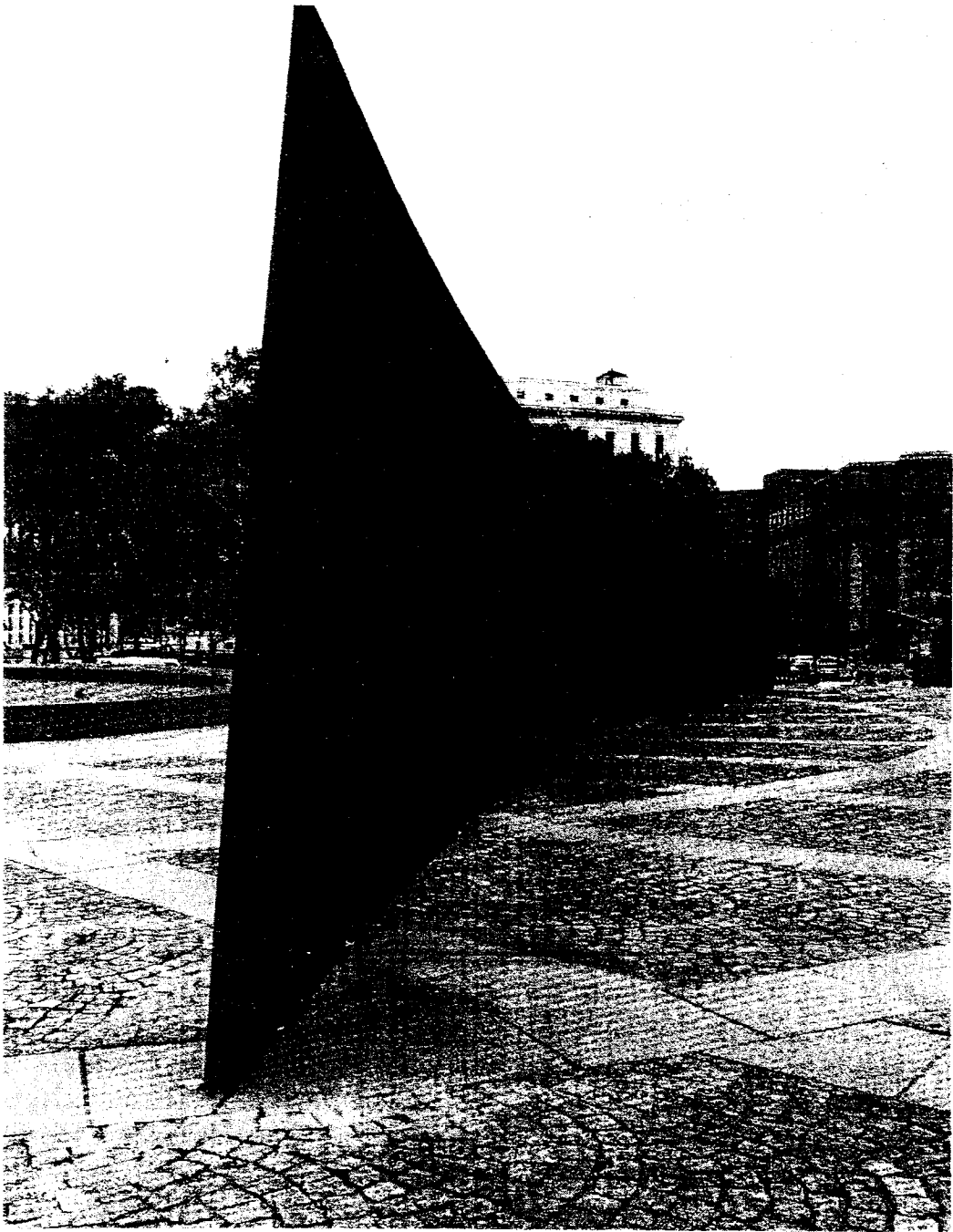
Picasso's conflated image of his wife Jacqueline and his pet Afghan combines, in abstract form, the objects of his most intimate affections and desires. Sexual connotations become apparent as one walks around the sculpture, and Hartmann speculated that Picasso "got a bang over the fact that this was Chicago, a strong vulgar city. . . . I thought then that it came at a nice point—it was kind of an off-beat interlude in his life. So it might have been a little stimulus and Madame Picasso enjoyed it too."<sup>5</sup> Although sexual content is often a significant factor in Picasso's work, it has been ignored or unconsciously repressed in discussions of the "Chicago Picasso."

The patrons (the architects, led by Hartmann of SOM, with Daley's approval) wanted to create a plaza for Chicago's Civic Center based on European precedent, one that would ensure Chicago's place on the cultural map and give the city a sense of prideful ownership of art comparable to that of a collector or a museum. (Hartmann subsequently became a board member of the Chicago Art Institute.)

Although some members of the public saw the sculpture for what it was, a woman and/or an Afghan hound, they were never apprised of its actual significance, which related only to Picasso and his art, and not at all to Chicago. Nevertheless, the public, encouraged by the mayor and the media, adopted the sculpture as a locus of civic pride. Thus Picasso's fame (his nearly universal name recognition) sufficed to make the sculpture acceptable even if it made no sense to its primary audience. The sculpture was perceived and used as a civic logo, much the way that Alexander Calder's *La Grande Vitesse* in Grand Rapids (the first sculpture sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts' Art in Public Places program) was, just a few years later.

The public responding to the "Chicago Picasso" followed a direct "looks like" approach in trying to make sense of it. This metaphorical process is a necessary method of identification in life and art. The primary difference between the two is the context in which the process takes place. In a museum or gallery, a select and voluntary audience places the art in a context relating to a known body of work—both the artist's and a larger art historical oeuvre. An involuntary audience in a public place has as its primary frame of reference the context of daily life. Without an art context, usually provided as a matter of course to an already informed audience in a museum, a general audience must rely on literal comparison ("it looks like a baboon") or generic category ("it's art," or "it's abstract art") for identification. Neither is sufficient. Without an accompanying art education component, the public audience is excluded from the art experience ostensibly intended for them and the art remains a foreign object on familiar turf.

If a strange-looking art object cannot be readily identified, it can sometimes be cleverly translated into vernacular terms. A few years ago a proposed public sculpture by Joel Shapiro became the object of a furious debate when the public (or press) dubbed the rather innocuous-looking piece with a heavy price tag "the headless Gumby." T-shirts with this image were manufactured at once and became an immediate success.<sup>6</sup> Identifying the abstract sculpture with Gumby brought it into an accessible frame of reference and made it an object of easy attack and ridicule. A similar translation of so-called high art into popular culture occurred when Noguchi's *Landscape of Time*, a General Services Administration commission of 1975, was related to the contemporary "pet rock" craze.<sup>7</sup> Noguchi's sculpture consisted of five natural stones with surfaces incised by the artist, arranged in an open composition in front of the Seattle Federal Building. Michael Heizer's *Adjacent, Against, Upon* (1977), also in Seattle, was subject to the same comparison. Although different in appearance and content



Richard Serra, *Tilted Arc*, 1981, Federal Plaza, New York, NY, removed 1989.  
(Photo: Dith Prahm, courtesy Richard Serra)

(Heizer was concerned with the physical relationships defined in the title), both works utilized natural rocks, apparently a sufficient basis for the glib comparison that revealed a problem of considerable magnitude.

Although material costs are easily calculated, the creative process is difficult to evaluate in monetary terms. Referring to Noguchi's *Landscape of Time*, the National Taxpayers' Union was quoted as saying, "The rocks . . . look for all the world like common boulders. Though the boulders were available for \$5.50 a ton, or a total value of \$44, when they were mined, the hard bargainers at GSA purchased the entire collection for \$100,000."<sup>8</sup> The relationship between art and money is never a comfortable one. CBS news reporter Walter Cronkite prompted a considerable public outcry when he announced the outlay of federal funds for Claes Oldenburg's *Batcolumn* (Chicago, 1977) the night before income tax returns were due. When art and money are juxtaposed (as they frequently are on the front page of newspapers), the inevitable association is one of conspicuous and suspect luxury if the patron is an individual or private corporation, or excessive spending when public money is involved. Although the intrinsic value of art is not translatable into monetary terms, in our consumer culture money is easier to understand than art and it appears to be an accessible and accurate barometer of worth.

If a work of art is not tamed or framed by being placed within a familiar context, a sense of unease persists, sometimes to the point where the work of art itself is perceived as threatening. Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* (GSA, Federal Plaza, New York, 1981) was compared to the Berlin Wall, and a physical security specialist for the Federal Protection and Safety Division of the GSA went so far as to contend that the sculpture presented "a blast wall effect . . . comparable to devices which are used to vent explosive forces. This one could vent an explosion both upward and in an angle toward both buildings."<sup>9</sup> In the same vein, Charles Ginnever's *Protagoras* (1974), a GSA commission in St. Paul, was seen as "a potential machine-gun nest" and the "undercarriage of a UFO-type flying saucer."<sup>10</sup>

It is interesting that the perceived threat of physical violence is not unique to monolithic minimal sculpture. George Sugarman's colorful *Baltimore Federal* (GSA, 1978), an open latticework, multipart piece that provides seating, was seen as threatening because theoretically it "could be utilized as a platform for speaking and hurling objects by dissident groups . . . its contours would provide an attractive hazard for youngsters naturally drawn to it, and most important, the structure could well be used to secrete bombs or other explosive objects."<sup>11</sup> These responses may be seen as a metaphor for the violent feelings the sculptures aroused in their primary

audience—users of the government buildings where the works were sited. Recent history has shown this reaction to be especially common among judges and security officials, who, respectively, serve precedent and protect the public. Thus both Sugarman's and Serra's sculptures may be perceived as especially threatening, as either unprecedented or new and strange looking, by those whose professional capacities demand an approach based on the known past or one that, of necessity, views the new with suspicion and distrust.

In a broader context, seeing art as dangerous is an acknowledgment of its power. Public art in particular is powerful, because it stands for "the powers that be." Thus, as recent events in the former Soviet Union have once again shown, a political coup is immediately followed by the destruction of public art images of the previous rulers and heroes. Even public art without specific political connotations may fall prey to the political agendas of different administrations and the political climate of the time. But, although public response may be influenced or manipulated by those in power, it still reveals deep-seated attitudes or approaches to art.

Art embodies values, an intangible content that represents a tangible reality which may or may not have been part of the artist's intent. That is what people respond to when they attack statues of rulers no longer in favor or sculpture that stands for a system that doesn't address their most basic physical or spiritual needs. When people compare a Picasso sculpture to a baboon, they are really saying, "You (the powers that be) have put this strange object in my space (without asking me, the powerless individual). How does it relate to my known world, me, my life?" When people relate Noguchi and Heizer sculptures to the pet rock craze, they are really saying, "That's a rock (or rocks). I can see that, and I can buy one of those (only smaller, but neatly boxed) at the local five-and-dime. This is a rip-off." These comparisons are attempts to understand the seen, to make sense of the visible world, to place strange objects that have invaded a familiar space into a known context.

Most tellingly, one outspoken colonel when first confronting the "Chicago Picasso" suggested, "If it is a bird or an animal they ought to put it in the zoo. If it is art, they ought to put it in the Art Institute."<sup>12</sup> In other words, "Unfamiliar art doesn't belong here in this public space. It belongs in a place that clearly identifies its objects as art so you only have to look at them if you want to." What all these responses are telling us is that an understandable context is missing and without that another one will be found (with or without the assistance of facile journalists). The "What is it?" question must be answered. And if all we can come up with is "It's art,"





George Sugarman, *Baltimore Federal*, 1978, Edward A. Garmatz Federal Building and Courthouse, Baltimore, MD. (Photo: Courtesy George Sugarman)

that's not enough, unless it comes with a useful art context that will begin to make the work meaningful to any viewer.

In the decades since the "Chicago Picasso," public art has evolved to include more than individual sculpture. It often addresses the entire site and takes on functions (seating, lighting, plantings) that in the past were the domain of landscape architecture or city planning. Thus the public's physical needs are recognized. At other times it presumes to speak for or to the public through messages or gestures that address contemporary social problems, such as homelessness. Although in recent years the emphasis in public art commissions in this country has increasingly been on "the public" rather than the art component of this complex genre, basic presumptions are still being made and work is still being produced that makes sense primarily or only to an art-informed audience.

One immediate solution is to provide a public art education component along with the art, no matter what form it takes.<sup>13</sup> (Another, on a broader basis, is to continue to lobby for art education in the public schools.) What we cannot afford to do is dismiss public responses or presume to know what the public wants. If we want to know the answer to that vexing question, we have to talk directly, at length, to the various individuals who constitute or represent "the public" at any given time and place. Through dialogue, specific concerns and underlying issues must be addressed, and then artists and public art administrators have to decide whether and how best to translate these factors into public art.

At issue here is not just the future of public art but an understanding of art's place in a democratic society that is trying to broaden the definition of its constituency in a meaningful way.

## Notes

1. The "pet rock" craze of the mid-1970s involved the sale of small rocks, neatly packaged in cardboard boxes, whose only distinction was their designation as pets.

2. For a detailed discussion of this commission, see Harriet F. Senie, *Contemporary Public Sculpture: Tradition, Transformation, and Controversy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), ch. 3.

3. William B. Chappell, "The Chicago Picasso Reviewed a Decade Later," *Art International*, October–November 1977, pp. 61–63, establishes the derivation of the piece beyond any doubt.

4. Patricia Balton Stratton, "Chicago Picasso" (M.A. thesis, Northwestern University, 1982), p. 145. See also Gerald Nordlund, *Controversial Public Art from Rodin to di Suvero* (Milwaukee Art Museum, 1983), pp. 40–42.

5. Stratton, "Chicago Picasso," p. 219. Hartmann's observations were made in an interview with Stratton on August 11, 1981.

6. These events were related to the author in October 1988 by a private resident of Charlotte, North Carolina, as well as an individual closely involved with the commission.

7. The GSA has been a major patron of public sculpture with its percent-for-art program, in effect since the late 1960s. For a discussion of this program, see Donald W. Thalacker, *The Place of Art in the World of Architecture* (New York: Chelsea House and R. R. Bowker, 1980).

8. Ronald G. Shafer, "A Touch of Class? Washington Planners Beset by Critical Public over Their Efforts to Put Art into Architecture," *Wall Street Journal*, September 21, 1976, p. 48.

9. This and other testimony is available in the proceedings on the GSA hearing on *Tilted Arc*, which took place on March 6–8, 1985. For a complete discussion of the controversy and removal of the sculpture, see Harriet F. Senie, *Dangerous Precedent: Richard Serra's "Tilted Arc" in Context* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

10. See Thalacker, *Place of Art*, p. vii.

11. For a summary of the controversy, see JoAnn Lewis, "People Sculpture: Objections Overruled," *Art News*, December 1976, pp. 83–85. A more detailed account is provided in Thalacker, *Place of Art*, pp. 8–13.

12. Edward Schreiber, "Picasso Work Rubs Reilly in Wrong Places," *Chicago Tribune*, June 14, 1967.

13. More experimentation is necessary to determine what programs work best in different communities. Artists' talks, public symposia, descriptive panels or video programs at the site to explicate the art and discuss it in the context of the artist's career as well as of other public art, and outreach programs in local schools and corporations are among many approaches that have been tried and proved useful.