The World is Our Playground: Public Art as Intermediary Between the Community and Urban Environment

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I would like to thank the Oklahoma Center for the Humanities, particularly director Dr. Sean Latham, for their support, insights, and inspiration.
The World is Our Playground: Public Art as Intermediary Between the Community and Urban Environment

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Abstract

The contemporary approach to public art tends to view these projects as fun, but kitschy. While in many instances, art in public spaces may be intended to be primarily entertaining, these projects also hold the potential to reimagine communities in ways that cannot be tapped without recognizing this possibility. I propose an analysis of public art that considers three aspects: lusory, community, and critical. Lusory art in public spaces invites viewers to engage with play in the urban environment which primarily values efficiency over leisure. Art in public spaces can also lend itself to establishing or highlighting community ties, either by illustrating a shared history or giving a physical presence to specific cultural groups. Finally, critical art challenges viewers to reimagine their place in the spaces they inhabit and their relationships with others, recognizing social issues and confronting us with it. By studying national examples, as well as examples specifically in Tulsa, Oklahoma, I investigate the ways public art allows an opportunity to intentionally reimagine the urban environment to be more inclusive. I specifically consider the upcoming project to commemorate the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre. I found that although public art cannot completely reconcile tragic histories such as these, projects hold the potential to encourage confrontation with the ways these histories continue to manifest.

Keywords: Art History, Public Art, Community Identity, Urban Planning
Introduction

Public art presents an opportunity for communities to contemplate their regional and cultural identities through the lens of the spaces that individuals share. Whether employing lighthearted or challenging themes and aesthetics, art in public spaces gives the individual agency to engage in disruptive and playful thinking within urban spaces inherently geared towards efficiency. While public art has traditionally been cast as being primarily decorative or commemorative, upcoming projects hold the potential to expand the role of the arts in individuals’ everyday lives. Analyzing aspects of public art in the categories of lusory, community, and critical art allows for a deeper understanding of the role of play in conveying meaning and creating lasting experiences. The role of art in public spaces has become increasingly relevant in Tulsa, Oklahoma specifically, as the site of the 1921 Race Massacre. With an approaching centennial commemoration project, the considerations in producing a work capable of appropriately addressing histories and shared traumas in the community are not only pertinent, but paramount in constructing an inclusive and open social environment.

When considering a concept as abstract as play, it is necessary to construct a working definition. Acts of play are characterized by a deviation from routine. Rather than simply completing prescribed goals, play allows a space for creativity, innovation, and contemplation. Play does not have to be playful and is not necessarily a game; instead, play is enacted for the sake of itself rather than for the sake of efficiency. The vast possibilities of play lie in its universality across humanity. Cross-disciplinary exploration demonstrates the intrinsic nature of the urge to play and the origins of this in anthropological studies.

Anthropologists and social scientists explore play in rituals and actions that communities participate in. In *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga argues that play is not just a neurological process that
facilitates social behavior, but a foundational means through which groups construct culture (Huizinga 1). Rather than representing the kinds of games that children play, play on a larger cultural scale is characterized by actions that are not taken to complete a goal, but to enrich an experience. Huizinga argues that play is more than a psychological or biological process, but “transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action” (Huizinga 1).

Because play is not a physical necessity, it represents a space of freedom to explore imagination, creativity, and expression. In rituals, play allows participants to impart meaning beyond the literal actions involved. Instead, acts such as sacred performances and dances, or even rituals like taking communion during mass, take on greater meanings by transporting individuals to a sphere of meaning independent of reality (Huizinga 16).

Despite the structuring of culture around the shared experience of play, people favor the efficiency of work over the seeming wastefulness of play. With the growth of industrialism, civilization moves towards being “more serious; it assigns only a secondary place to playing” (Huizinga 75). Everyone works for their wages, works for their basic abilities to survive; only after these primary needs are met is there a space for play, existing only in the apparent margins of real life. However, if play is to be understood as anthropologically foundational in humanity, the distinction between productivity and play must be at least in part falsely conceived. Despite this, cities are built to increasingly disallow play as they aim to singularly cater to productivity and efficiency instead of creativity and contemplation. Viewed as inefficient and impractical, attention to play in city planning is reduced to a risky investment without promise of productive results (Stephens 1). However, the very basis of humanity, as seen through the eyes of thinkers like Huizinga, lies in the non-commodifiable, non-literal meaning drawn from interactions—lies in play—rather than from the actions themselves.
Public spaces represent the most pronounced opportunity for social interactions, the clearest stage to enact the rituals and cultural actions. In these open spaces, individuals of diverse backgrounds gather and engage with each other (Stephens 5). The shared experiences that Huizinga highlights are continually reinvented as the community comes together with the same underlying urge towards play. As a site of convergence, the city acts as a backdrop to the collective experiences of communities. Images and indicators of the past trigger memories while new additions project the city into the future. The city, then, is “both old and modern, not only a place filled with memory but also the center of social transformation” (Stephens 15). In order to fully realize the potential of the city to carry out these roles, the urban environment is a space to encourage play: to reimagine the commodifiable aspects of living and facilitate meaningful occasions to engage in thinking independent of preset goals. It is within these spaces between efficiency and action that public art allows individuals to make and remake meaning.

Considering the demonstrated necessity of play in the healthy and functional development of individuals in communities, the urban environment presents a space to embrace this linking force. Here, public art invites members of a community several opportunities to play, extending an opportunity for respite from quantifiable productivity, a moment to contemplate their role in the larger community, and even an invitation to rethink this role. With this, I consider three aspects of public art with which to approach a holistic understanding of initiatives that have taken hold of cities across the world. Lusory art is inherently geared towards play, emboldening viewers to rethink the way they interact with everyday objects. Community art speaks to a shared history and visual vocabulary recognized by members of a specific group, whether it be an entire city recognizing its history or a cultural group rallying around a shared experience. Finally, critical art identifies a problem in society and aims to address it with the
intent to alter the way that viewers approach the issue moving forward. In each of these categories, play opens a space for these dialogues.

**LUSORY ART**

Lusory art is characteristically playful. Aspects of public art that are lusory encourage viewers to understand their environments in new ways. Rather than simply participating in a routine geared towards completion of tasks, lusory art allows the public to take a moment to pause and think about the spaces that they move through. Magda Sayeg’s yarn bombing represents an example of public art that is primarily lusory in nature. Sayeg started yarn bombing by knitting a piece of fabric for her door handle, but quickly began making larger pieces that were spread across the city. Objects like stop sign poles, statues, and trees (see Appendix for Fig. 1) were covered in yarn for this project. In her artist statement, Sayeg outlines her intention to work with an object “without taking away its identity or paralyzing its original function” and through this to make them “come to life” (“Magda Sayeg Bio”). Working with a material that seems out of place, yarn bombing softens the coldness of the city. Despite this, the objects that are covered in yarn do not inextricably alter the original purpose of things like signs. Rather, they offer a playful reimagining of them. In this way, yarn bombing embodies the principles of lusory art through its reimagining of urban spaces.

Within Tulsa, examples of lusory art have been expanded by programs like the Urban Core Act Project (UCAP). This project was created to develop temporary art projects that are placed throughout downtown Tulsa, contributing lusory aesthetics and experiences to the city. Through temporary installations, UCAP encourages active conversation and interaction in common spaces, hoping to engage “viewers to think about their surroundings in fresh ways” (Urban Core). One such project was installed from March 2018-2019 in Chapman Centennial...
Green at 6th and Main. Patrick Dougherty’s “Prairie Schooners” (see Appendix for Fig. 2) features seven sculptural structures made of wispy branches that appear as small, windswept buildings. Dougherty describes picturing the vast green commons with “wagons crossing the prairie as islands in a sea of grass” (Recent: Prairie Schooners). With this, the artist reinterprets the space, seeing his own contributions as islands in water and melding the natural and urban spheres. Further, the structures allow visitors to physically move through them in a walking path that leads them underneath each wisp. Here, viewers are enveloped in an experience of nature, literally shielded from the bustle of downtown Tulsa. Through this project, Tulsa facilitates play through inherently playful works of art.

COMMUNITY ART

Another category of public art can be understood as community art. Community art caters to a specific group, keying in on a particular aspect of history or an aesthetic element that members of this group can recognize. With community art, the invocation of play that builds social relationships invites viewers to further explore these bonds. This can manifest in several ways. Memorial projects commemorate a specific event or person. These works speak to a wide audience, building on shared historical knowledge. In Washington D.C., for example, Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial (see Appendix for Fig. 3) commemorates this war that resulted in the deaths of more than 58,000 Americans whose names are engraved in the reflective black granite. In this iconic memorial, Lin employs a somber, rather than playful, approach to engaging the public in a moment of thoughtful contemplation. The memorial appears as a scar in the landscape of the city; as visitors approach, they not only see the engraved names, but themselves reflected. The walls of granite meet at a single point that points towards the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument, situating the Vietnam War in the fabric of the
country’s history (Maya Lin). Lin’s memorial sculpture draws on the collective memory of the country, reminding everyone who visits the memorial of the war and placing it in constant conversation with the rest of the urban environment of the nation’s capital.

Another manifestation of community art is seen in the art created for specific cultural groups, unified around a shared experience rather than shared memories. These works often give a sense of space to marginalized groups whose voices have not been heard and whose presence has been ignored. Nancy Anne Coyne’s installation in St. Paul, Speaking of Home (see Appendix for Fig. 4), seeks to give space to the large immigrant population in Minnesota. Coyne reached out to immigrants in the city, requesting family photos that she enlarged and placed in the windows of skywalks. The 58 families from six continents that participated spoke with Coyne about how they understood the idea of “home,” which were incorporated in text panels inside the skywalk (Stewart). Through this installation, people walking through the city are confronted with images of immigrants, whose population has drastically increased throughout the country and tripled in Minnesota over the past 20 years (Stewart). Despite this growth, Coyne identifies that these groups often go overlooked. Through manipulation of an urban element, the skywalk, citizens of diverse backgrounds look out into the city through these images as they walk through the passage and up at these images from the street below, disrupting the usual flow of the city in an act of play. Speaking of Home illustrates the effects of community art that emphasizes and explores the shared experience of moving homes in the lives of immigrant communities.

Several works in Tulsa serve a similar function as works of community art. A newly installed mural in the Greenwood District marks the site of what used to be Black Wall Street. Artists Chris “Sker” Rogers and Donald “Scribe” Ross collaborated to pull from the history of Tulsa. The Black Wall Street mural (see Appendix for Fig. 5) establishes community ties through
memorializing an aspect of the city’s shared memory of this flourishing business and cultural
district. More than this, the Black Wall Street Mural speaks to these ties in its evocation of the
experience of Black people currently living in Tulsa. After the tragic Massacre of 1921, Black
Wall Street was destroyed, leaving in its wake a continued legacy of racism and division in the
city. Understanding this, Sker and Scribe incorporate imagery in each of the block letters that
draws on the history of the Greenwood District. The “B” illustrates some of the businesses that
categorized Black Wall Street like the Williams Dreamland Theatre, while the smoke and
destruction in the “K” reference the 1921 Massacre that devastated these businesses (Marshall).
The letters draw on a shared set of historical knowledge, effectively memorializing a historic
space. Beyond this, letters like the “A” referencing soul music and the “S” saluting Juneteenth
celebrations speak to a more cultural experience. The 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre is a history that
can, and should, be universally recognized; the reality of being Black in Tulsa, though, is further
evoked and expanded through inclusion of imagery evocative of culture rather than just of
history.

CRITICAL ART

A final category of public art can be seen as critical art. Works of critical art identify a
problem within a community or society and aim to remedy it by presenting it to a public forum:
the city. Here, people are confronted with criticisms of society and forced to consider their
implicit roles in the problems. By disrupting the flow of work, act of play, critical art challenges
the viewer to reconsider their relationships with other members of the community and with the
practices they share. A poignant example of critical art can be seen in Jenny Holzer’s VIGIL
series of projections at Rockefeller Center (see Appendix for Fig. 6). In this project, Holzer uses
quotes from accounts of gun violence. One such projection quotes a survivor of a workplace
shooting, Cheryl Stumbo, recounting “I remember pleading while running and ducking under flying bullets. I remember ducking under an old truck” (Okamoto). In bold text, Holzer imposes this reminder of daily acts of gun violence. The emotional quotes make these risks immediate and personal as viewers are confronted with unignorable expressions of psychological trauma endured by survivors. In this way, the invitation to pause and think that works of public art offer can be molded to send a critical message. In these playful spaces outside of daily routine and work, artists command a space for rethinking complacency that viewers may fall into.

Several works in Tulsa serve a similar function as works of critical art. A recent mural created by Alexander Tamahn on the Living Arts Building depicts brightly colored fists clasped together tightly with blood seeping out of the central fist’s palm (see Appendix for Fig. 7). This mural, inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement, was born out of controversy regarding another of Tamahn’s murals that the building’s owner painted over. His new permanent installation, Tamahn describes, aims to address the racial tensions within the city, representing solidarity between people of color in the face of these tensions (Zinzi). The dripping blood and tension of the fists as they grab at each other convey a sense of strength in the face of adversity. In this, Tamahn draws on the Black Lives Matter movement to present a criticism. Confronted with this image, viewers are struck both by the brutality and the beauty of the image. By drawing on a shared visual vocabulary through the raised fist and adapting the image to incorporate and include bright colors, Tamahn effectively commands attention to this important and critical movement.

While each of these categories can be understood as tools to approach public art, they are almost always fused together. Regardless of the weight of an artist’s message or intention, or whether the message is playful or not, art in public spaces facilitates play by nature of
interrupting routine. Rather than drifting through an urban environment, using the city only as an intermediary space between tasks, public artists enliven the city. These works break this mold and encourage individuals to interact with each other, not just physically, but by considering the atmosphere in which they exist in and continuously create. In this way, the act of play is not only an opportunity for fun or lusory thought, but for challenging actors in a space to rethink their places in a community.

Tamahn’s mural fuses critical and community art as he criticizes the unfair and often brutal treatment of people of color, especially Black people, by highlighting their experiences living in Tulsa. An artist working in the Black Moon Collective, a group of Black artists in Tulsa, Tamahn represents a movement within the city towards giving presence to these perspectives. In this way, the critical message of the mural is achieved by physically manifesting people of color in a public space. The mural speaks to a shared experience that a community can identify with and aims to remedy injustices. Works like Charles Simonds’s *Dwellings* (see Appendix for Fig. 8) fuse all three categories. The *Dwellings* began as a place to shelter Simonds’s imaginary Little People,” which were characters he wrote about (Knight 108). With a lusory attitude, Simonds set these small houses in the public as his own exercise in reimagining the space to fit his own imagination. However, as the public began to interact with the *Dwellings*, they accrued a new set of meanings, taking on the qualities of community and critical art. The small structures, made of unfired clay bricks, were entirely vulnerable to the elements; they became a metaphor for the poor and homeless residents of the area, vulnerable in their own ways (Knight 116). In this way, the *Dwellings* not only spoke to a specific shared experience of individuals in the area, but also became a metaphor that was critical of their poor treatment. As the *Dwellings* were introduced to the public spaces, they took on greater meaning; interacting
with the works absorbed the artist’s original intentions into the fabric of a greater community. Agency, not just artistic intention, facilitates playful thinking. When open to the public, works of art become part of the community.

**CREATING PUBLIC ART**

Public art has many faces and thus can be implemented to meet many ends. In some examples, public art primarily serves to enliven spaces, making them more exciting through lusory works like Dougherty’s *Prairie Schooners* while other instances, artists aim to interact more personally with the public through community works like the Black Wall Street Mural in Tulsa created by Sker and Scribe. More recently, though, works have taken on an increasingly critical tone, identifying injustices and addressing them head on as does Tamahn in his Black Lives Matter mural. Play in public spaces not only represents an outlet from quantifiable goals and monotonous efficiency through lusory means but marks an opportunity to challenge societal norms. Considering the remarkable potential of play to enact social changes in an engaging way, cities like Tulsa have continuously moved towards initiatives that encourage the arts as the city becomes increasingly aware of its diverse communities.

In an effort to reconcile its historic mistreatment of Black communities in North Tulsa, a public art initiative, the Greenwood Art Project, is part of the plan to commemorate the centennial of the 1921 Race Massacre. Considerations in art dealing with such a sensitive history as the Massacre complicates the approach in creating a work that can fairly deal with this memory. Allowing a work to address this tragedy encourages recognition of injustices that Black people have historically faced and continue to feel. However, Miwon Kwon discusses the potential downfalls of works that seek to fulfill community or critical goals. Particularly when bringing an artist from outside of the community, complex and multifaceted identities may be
flattened through works that do not appropriately capture these considerations. The commemoration of the Race Massacre threatens to reduce a manifold experience of devastation and continued trauma, prescribing a single image to it. Considering the complexities of community and critical aspects of public art, Kwon posits several means through which to more effectively approach works such as the Race Massacre project. While public works of art often serve to alleviate tensions, “uneven distribution of existing cultural and economic resources” are sources of dissatisfaction in communities that necessitate reallocation of resources and continued problem solving; public art may draw attention to these problems, but do not solve them (Kwon 153).

The devastation of Black Wall Street is an issue that a single work of commemoration cannot fully address. The act of physically manifesting reminders of these tragic histories encourages individuals existing in these spaces to remember and consider their places in existing power structures, but a single work is incapable of amending these histories entirely. Instead, combining other efforts such as allocation of money to reinvigorate Black Wall Street and continued support to local artists such as Tamahn, Skep, Script, can more adequately address the complexities of Tulsa’s violent history. The commemoration project for the Race Massacre, then, necessarily represents a step towards reconciliation, not an achievement of it.

As the city prepares to facilitate the Greenwood Art Project, community and arts leaders necessarily consider the potential pitfalls and possibilities of achievements associated with public art. While works of public art encompass a potential to invigorate cities and engage individuals in conversations and thoughts about their inhabitants, this is a potential that must be met responsibly. In order to be successful, in order to be critical without flattening complex issues, public art projects must synthesize the perspectives of individuals living in these spaces. To
appropriately address these issues, public art should not be seen as an end all solution, but rather as a vehicle to incite larger scale changes. Whether this be reallocating economic and political resources to disempowered communities or encouraging the city as a whole to consider the continued effects of historic oppression, public art invites reconsideration and recreation of shared values.

Public art, in all of its forms, invites passersby to engage with it. In this disruption of routine in urban environments, these works contain the potential for play. Whether this play takes on lusory, community, or critical elements, public art facilitates rethinking of social relationships and reimagining of group identity. Huizinga’s assertion that “culture arises in the form of play” allows for continuous reimagining of culture through perpetual play (Huizinga 46). In cases like the commemoration of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, cultural practices may be adapted to encourage greater mutual understanding and acceptance of other members of the community but complicates notions of how play can be applied. Within cities, the heavy flow of people maximizes exposure. In this way, the urban environment is the ideal location for art; rather than visiting a museum in an act of prescribed leisure, routine in the city is disrupted through interactions with public art. To account for the multifaceted and ever-changing nature of communities, public art invites individuals to come together, breaking routine in an act of contemplation, in the face of the desocializing urban environment.
Works Cited


Appendix

(Fig. 1) Magda Sayeg. Yarn Bombing outside the Texas State Capitol in Austin, TX. Photo via Sayeg’s artist website at www.magdasayeg.com/.

(Fig. 2) Patrick Dougherty. *Prairie Schooners*. 2018. Various species of willow, with the structural skeleton of hackberry, elm, and ash. Photo by Geoffrey Hicks.

(Fig. 3) Maya Lin. *Vietnam Veteran’s Memorial*. 1982. Granite. Photo by Stephen O’Byrne.
(Fig. 4) Nancy Anne Coyne. *Speaking of Home*. 2016. Photo by David Turner.

(Fig. 5) Chris “Sker” Rogers and Donald “Scribe” Ross. *Black Wall Street* Mural. 2019. Photo by Janna Zinzi.
(Fig. 6) Jenny Holzer. *VIGIL*. 2019. Projection on Rockefeller Center. Photo by Lauren Camarata. (Left: “Around every day. You know someone. Or they know someone who was shot, or had a gun held to their heads. My shooting was a hate crime.” Right: “Of my life. I remember pleading while running and ducking from flying bullets. I remember diving under an old truck.”)


(Fig. 8) Charles Simonds. *Dwellings* in New York City. 1975. Clay, sand, and wood. Photo via Simonds’s artist website at http://www.charles-simonds.com/dwellings70s.html.