

Public Art for Public Schools:
A Critical Analysis through Four Case Studies

By Mara Hoberman

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Thesis Sponsor:

Date

Professor Katy Siegel

Date

Professor Harriet Senie
Second Reader

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Acknowledgements

My academic interest in public art was sparked during my first semester in the art history master's degree program at Hunter College in the fall of 2006. Professor Lowery Sims brought up Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* during our "Theory and Criticism" class and her summation of the consequent scandal inspired me to write a paper in which I argued that publicity (even negative) was vital to a public artwork's success in that it forces people to think and talk about art's role in the public realm. In the years since—after much additional research; an internship with New York City's Percent for Art program; numerous conversations with artists, art administrators, architects, artists and art historians; and hours upon hours of contemplation—I have developed a more nuanced understanding of what "success" means in terms of public art. I continue to be fascinated and surprised by the genre and am grateful to Professor Sims for having set me off on an ongoing investigation into the thorny and complex subject of public art in the U.S.

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*The history of art has sometimes been presented as a history of styles.
The history of public art will more likely be seen as a history of intentions.*

--Miles Malcolm, 1989¹

The culture war in the U.S. during the 1980s and 1990s left a powerful and long-lasting impression of what can go wrong when the government commissions artists to make art for the public sphere. By and large, historians describe public art from these years as a tale of good intentions gone awry—debacles and misunderstandings ranging from mediocre duds to incendiary scandals. The archetype for failure from this period is Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* which, following a series of public hearings in 1989, was removed from the public plaza in lower Manhattan where it had been installed eight years earlier as part of the Federal government's Arts-in-Architecture program.² This dramatic case pitted the "public" and the artist against each other, their interests ultimately (although arguably baselessly) deemed irreconcilable.³ An unexpected positive outcome

¹ Cher Krause Knight, *Public Art: Theory, Practice and Populism* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008): 22.

² "Culture Shock: Visual Arts" [PBS.com](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/cultureshock/flashpoints/visualarts/tiltedarct.html) <<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/cultureshock/flashpoints/visualarts/tiltedarct.html>> (accessed 1 April 2010).

³ It has been argued by Harriet Senie, among others, that the legacy of *Tilted Arc* is an example of history having been written by the victor: in this case, William Diamond (New York's regional administrator of the General Services Administration.) In 1985 Diamond launched a campaign to have Serra's monumental abstract sculpture removed from its sited location (lower Manhattan's Federal Plaza.) Although the majority of people who testified over the course of the three-day public hearings about whether or not *Tilted Arc* should remain spoke out in favor of keeping the sculpture, Diamond succeeded in having the fifteen-ton steel structure removed. By reframing the events that led up to the hearings and removal of *Tilted Arc*'s, Senie challenges the conventional understanding of this notorious public art debate. Although the *Tilted Arc* controversy is often cited as an example of how "abstract art alienates the public," Senie counters that while public opinion was frequently cited (by Diamond as well as by other politicians and

of this debacle is that it highlighted a critical disconnect between the government's objectives, the artist's intentions, and the artwork's ability to effectively engage and properly serve a public audience. The *Tilted Arc* scandal has had a significant residual impact on the way that more recent public art projects are conceived of, carried out, and memorialized. According to Harriet Senie,

Although Serra conceived his site-specific sculpture in antithesis to the then recent public art that was criticized for having no relationship to its site and for serving a merely decorative function, *Tilted Arc* was later seen as marking the end of an era of public art defined by abstract object sculpture, referred to disparagingly as 'plop art.'⁴

To explore the post-*Tilted Arc* shockwaves and further untangle the public art discourse that developed in the period immediately following the artwork's removal, this thesis will undertake a critical analysis of one specific public art program: New York City's government-sponsored Public Art for Public Schools (PAPS), which is charged with commissioning original artwork in a system that serves 1.1 million students in 1,600 schools.⁵

Founded in 1989, PAPS came into being just as controversies like the one surrounding *Tilted Arc* were changing the way people thought and talked about public art. Conversations amongst art professionals, bureaucrats, politicians, community activists, and the general public prompted by *Tilted Arc* revealed public art to be a complex hybrid

the press) as the main reason for the removal of *Tilted Arc*, overwhelming popular dissent against the artwork has never been accurately or justly documented. In fact, the "public" response during the hearings was two-to-one in favor of keeping the sculpture. Harriet Senie, *The Tilted Arc Controversy: Dangerous Precedent?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002)

⁴ Senie, 6.

⁵ "About Us," NYC Department of Education
<http://schools.nyc.gov/AboutUs/default.htm> (accessed 2 April 2010).

of artistic intent and social service, something that cannot be effectively created or constructively judged according to normative (Greenbergian) art critical discourses.⁶ Post-*Tilted Arc*, the art-in-public-places paradigm was criticized for failing to acknowledge the social and political implications of “site-specificity.” In response, a more socio-politically relevant model for public art began to emerge in the early 1990s: what artist Suzanne Lacy termed “new genre public art” and which can also be described as an art-in-the-public-interest model of public art.⁷ In 1993, Lacy described new genre public art as distinct from earlier forms of public art, defining it as “visual art that uses both traditional and nontraditional media to communicate and interact with a broad and diversified audience about issues directly relevant to their lives.”⁸ This enlightened understanding of public art recognizes the futility (and potentially incendiary ramifications) of simply placing art in public places. New genre public art also acknowledges the benefits of creating art within the public realm as distinct from the “art for art’s sake” value assigned to art exhibited in museums, galleries and other hermetic collections. Public art programs founded in the late 1980s and early 1990s, such as PAPS, were designed with awareness that the unique qualities of the site—physical, social, and political—should influence the specific nature of the final artwork to be installed.

⁶ American art critic Clement Greenberg’s essay “Towards a Newer Laocoön” (1940) argued that the value in art was located in its form. Greenberg’s formalist theories segregated art to an autonomous aesthetic realm, separate from social and political context.

⁷ Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004): 60.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 105.

When discussing public art in the U.S., it is important to extend hindsight beyond the most recent controversies and underscore the fact that what most people would now consider art has long been segregated from public life. The “culture war” that erupted in the 1990s is tied to a succession of historic attempts to democratize art and weave it into the fabric of everyday life, each of which is relevant to this thesis’s discussion of public art commissioned for New York City public schools in the 1990s. Although much has been written about the trajectory of public art, there is no hard and fast point from which to begin a discussion about the social and political origins of the genre. For instance, some scholars look back as far as the prehistoric Lascaux cave paintings when addressing the historic function of public art. Other art historians, however, continue to debate whether the “official” introduction of public art in the U.S. came in 1935 (the year the Works Progress Administration’s Federal Art Project was founded) or in 1967 (when the National Endowment for the Arts created the Art in Public Places program.)⁹ And the popular press (the most historically short-sighted source, yet that with strongest cultural impact and largest popular audience) tends to sensationalize each new example of “controversial” public art without alluding to any relevant precedents. Context (historical antecedents included) is essential for understanding the goals, implications, successes, and failures of public art.

Certainly the artworks created for New York City’s public schools in the 1990s relate to art commissioned through earlier public art programs. That said, PAPS’s philosophical mission and the precise nature (formal and conceptual) of each artwork the program has produced do not necessarily represent the culmination of a linear

⁹ Cameron Cartiere and Shelly Willis eds., *The Practice of Public Art* (New York: Routledge, 2008): 8.

progression towards an ever more successful model of public art. Rather, the development of the PAPS program—and for that matter, that of all government-sponsored public art initiatives—is best understood as the result of many years of diverse (often times contradictory) philosophies and practicalities related to art, education, social reform, politics, economics, and bureaucracy. The following is a select and abbreviated history (not intended to be comprehensive by any means), which touches on key moments that are contextually important to an investigation of the major public art issues confronting artists, art administrators, architects and the public at the end of the 20th-century.

The complex relationship between art and public life in the U.S., which over the course of the past two-hundred plus years has ranged from virtual indifference to fierce conflict, is tied to the political and social values that led to the American Revolution. The traditional European model for incorporating art into everyday life, which mainly entailed commissions awarded by the monarchy or the church (thus reflecting the taste and supporting the agenda of the ruling authorities), did not fit with the democratic agenda of America's founding fathers. The discrepancy between art and everyday life born out of this country's founding principles persists today: "The role and responsibility of federal art patronage in a democratic society continue to be subjects of often bitter debate."¹⁰ A viable populist model for government-sponsored public art commissions—one that gels with the egalitarian principle that government should represent the people without speaking for them—has yet to emerge.

¹⁰ Harriet Senie, *Contemporary Public Sculpture: Tradition, Transformation, and Controversy*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992): 5.

In addition to the fundamental problem of how to reconcile the public role of art within a democratic political agenda (without it becoming a propaganda tool), the aristocratic implications of “fine art” (as being a precious, decorative, and useless frivolity) in eighteenth-century Europe were also disagreeable to the purported social values of the new republic. In short, in American vernacular “public” and “art” can be defined in direct opposition, making it difficult to reconcile a comfortable public art practice. William Cleveland summed up the problematic relationship between art and everyday life in the U.S., writing, “This country does not have an historic commitment to a democratized culture. Our puritan ‘forefathers’ considered the secular arts to be an instrument of the devil and our earliest industrialist patrons related to culture as elitist decoration.”¹¹ Despite the clash between America’s self-styled democratic social and political values and the European model of public art, however, art commissions paid for by the U.S. government during the early nineteenth-century were largely awarded to European artists working in a European style.¹² The period between roughly 1876 and 1917 is known as the American Renaissance and during this time art and architecture “followed Italian High Renaissance precedents of styles and practices established under very different political, economic, and artistic conditions.”¹³

The first quintessentially democratic attempt at a public art initiative in the U.S. was the Works Progress Administration’s Federal Art Program, which was established by the federal government in the 1930s to reintegrate art into common-life. Describing the large-scale restitution the government embarked on in hopes of bringing art back to “the

¹¹ William Cleveland, "Bridges Translations and Change: The Arts an Infrastructure in 20th Century America," *High Performance Magazine*, 1992, 85.

¹² Senie, *Contemporary Public Sculpture*, 6.

¹³ *Ibid.*

people,” Holger Cahill (Director of the FAP, 1935-1943) conceded, “Not since the Middle Ages have we had an art that everyone could share.”¹⁴ (Here we have yet another location for the origin for public art.) In many ways, the goals and achievements of the WPA/FAP provided a model for the current PAPS program in terms of how to link public art to public education. For instance, one of the WPA/FAP’s manifold missions was to use art as an educational tool and this prompted government officials to join forces with school principals and Department of Education (DOE) personnel to commission thousands of murals for schools nation-wide.¹⁵ Approximately fifty WPA murals decorate public schools in New York City.¹⁶ During this period, many American artists—with a financial incentive from the government—not only performed a useful social role, but also sought to define a relevant relationship with the general public, a feat that has not been attempted on such a wide scale or with as much institutionalized support since.

In terms of the aesthetic development of public art in the U.S. and its fundamental ties to architectural styles and practices, it is important to note that in the 1930s influential members of the Bauhaus (notably, Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer, and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe) immigrated to the United States. The Bauhaus brought to America the idea of the “complete building,” a model that promoted close collaboration between artists and architects with the goal of developing art that would serve

¹⁴ Francis V. O’Connor, ed., *Art for the Millions* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society Ltd., 1973): 36.

¹⁵ Michele Cohen, *Public Art for Public Schools* (New York, NY: The Monacelli Press, 2009): 97-98

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

architecture decoratively.¹⁷ The desire that artists and architects act as a team to create what Gropius fantasized would be “the new structure of the future, which will embrace architecture and sculpture and painting in one unity...” caught on in the U.S. as a utopian theory, but was easier said than done.¹⁸ Structurally and stylistically modern architecture, with its stark steel and glass construction, presented a challenge for artists (and architects) in terms of how to incorporate art into the overall design of the building “without degenerating into mere applied ornament.”¹⁹ Although the rhetoric promoting artist-architect symbiosis was (and continues to be) popular, “true collaboration... remains a largely unrealized goal” (a problematic ideal which will be addressed at greater length later in this thesis.)²⁰ Ideas about how best to integrate (or simply include) art with architecture in public venues have continued to evolve and change.

New York City’s Department of Education in the 1950s and 1960s saw modern architecture and modern art as symbols of progressive education.²¹ School architects and the City agents responsible for overseeing the construction projects had tremendous control over the artwork created for schools. Together, they assumed responsibility for the location, aesthetic qualities and pedagogical value of art in schools. For Modernist architects, the “aesthetic ornamentation of city structures was anathema,” antithetical to the sleek and stark industrial aesthetic steel and concrete buildings.²² The artists who did receive commissions for New York City public schools during this period were largely

¹⁷ Senie, *Contemporary Public Sculpture*, 63.

¹⁸ Hans M. Wingler, *The Bauhaus: Weimar, Dessau, Berlin, Chicago, Boston* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1969): 31.

¹⁹ Henry-Russell Hitchcock, *The International Style: Architecture Since 1922* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1932) pp. 73-74.

²⁰ Senie, *Contemporary Public Sculpture*, 63.

²¹ Cohen, 136.

²² Finkelpearl, 21.

selected by the architects based on their perceived compatibility with the aesthetic of the overall building design.²³ This meant that an artist was typically brought on towards the end of a construction project and assigned a specific location for his/her artwork. Art created for schools (and for buildings in general during this period) was referred to as “architectural art” and generally took the form of sculptures, murals or mosaics that were intended to contrast the sober functional architecture of the building rather than to be integrated into the overall design.²⁴ Clement Greenberg’s formalist theory that art should be appreciated for its aesthetic qualities alone (with no social or political context and no subject matter) greatly influenced the style of public art from this period and served to bolster the barrier between art and everyday life.

The 1960s saw a revival of public sculpture in the U.S. and key polemical public art issues related to site-specificity and community involvement/engagement began to surface during this period.²⁵ The “Chicago Picasso” (untitled, 1967) marked the beginning of an important trend in public art whereby world-famous artists were commissioned to create artworks for pre-existing plazas as a means of urban renewal and redevelopment. Intended to decorate the plaza in front of the newly built Chicago Civic Center, the monumental “Chicago Picasso” was not the result of a design competition, public forum, panel selection or on-site artist-architect collaboration.²⁶ At the time of the

²³ Cohen, 120.

²⁴ Cohen, 120.

²⁵ In 1967 the National Endowment for the Arts created the Art in Public Places Program “to give the public access to the best art of our time outside of museum walls.” (Tom Finkelpearl, *Dialogues in Public Art* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001): 22.)

²⁶ Quite to the contrary, the “Chicago Picasso” commission came about largely thanks to the efforts of one man, William Hartmann. Hartmann, an architect at Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (which along with several other architecture firms designed the Chicago Civic Center) envisioned the public art component as a “chance to again show that the city

sculpture's dedication Chicago's then mayor, Richard J. Daley, is quoted as having said, "Picasso is the best artist in the world and that is what we care about."²⁷ However, "people on the streets of Chicago had...reservations" about the sculpture.²⁸ The discrepancy between the incentives (and aesthetic taste) of those in charge of the art commission and the of opinion of general public, as evidenced by the differing reactions to the "Chicago Picasso," continues to be a major issue in contemporary public art.²⁹

An example of an important artist (in terms of his exhibition history and academic reputation) who received a commission from the New York City Department of Education during this period is Hans Hoffmann. In the mid-1950s the lead architectural designer for the High School of Graphic Communications in Manhattan, B. Sumner Gruzen, approached Hoffmann about contributing an artwork to the school.³⁰ At this time, Hoffmann was considered one of America's most influential living abstract painters and teachers. Furthermore, Gruzen also collected Hoffman's work (and therefore had a personal interest in awarding him a commission).³¹ Public art commissions similar to Hoffmann's mosaic for the High School of Graphic Communications (Untitled, 1958) or the "Chicago Picasso" whereby "works of the most famous sculptors of the day...were

belonged to the people and that the people through their government had something symbolic..." Hartmann convinced Picasso, who had never been and would never even once go to Chicago, to design a large-scale permanent sculpture for the site—and by extension the city and the public. (Senie, *Contemporary Public Sculpture*, 96-97.)

²⁷ Senie, *Contemporary Public Sculpture*, 98.

²⁸ Tom Finkelpearl, *Dialogues in Public Art* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001): 22.

²⁹ Other well-known examples of the art-in public-places model, whereby "works of the most famous sculptors of the day...were chosen, a sign of their creators' international reputations rather than an expression of shared values or any specific meaning of the site" include Alexander Calder's *La Grande Vitesse* (1969), Henry Moore's *Reclining Figure* (1969), and Isamu Noguchi's *Red Cube* (1968). (Finkelpearl, *Dialogues in Public Art*, 14.)

³⁰ Cohen, 125.

³¹ *Ibid*, 126.

chosen, a sign of their creators' international reputations rather than an expression of shared values or any specific meaning of the site" was common practice in government-sponsored public art until *Tilted Arc* illustrated why this model was not necessarily an effective or appropriate method of reintroducing art into common-life.

Also in the 1960s, around the same time that the art-in-public places model of public art was taking off, major American cities began passing "Percent for Art" laws, beginning with Philadelphia in 1959, followed by Baltimore (1964) and then San Francisco (1967).³² The legislature mandated that a percentage of the overall construction budget for City buildings, including schools, be spent on artwork. A reaction against the "apposition" of Modernist art and architecture combined with the Percent for Art laws led to two major changes in public art.³³ The 1970s saw the rise of the design team model of public art where artists were involved in construction projects from the earliest planning stages.³⁴ Artists were asked to participate more (and earlier) in the design process and to work *with* architects (as opposed to *for* them, as was the case with the Bauhaus model.)

Another major change that came with the passage of Percent for Art legislature had to do with government control over spending for public art. The government's fiscal control over art commissions inevitably led to the formation of bureaucratic agencies specially charged with overseeing artist selection as well as the fabrication and

³² Knight, 8.

³³ In 1959, architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable (writing in *Craft Horizons*) described Modernist architects' conception of public art as being in "apposition" to their own aesthetic design. According to Huxtable, as opposed to a seamless integration of art and architecture, Modernist architects preferred sculptures placed next to buildings as opposed artworks that were conceived as part of the overall design. (Cohen, 120.)

³⁴ Kwon, 5.

installation of the final artwork. Government sponsorship for public art took power away from private philanthropists (the aristocratic European system) and to a lesser extent from the architects, and intended to give it to “the people.” The development of artist selection panels and design competitions insured that artists would be chosen democratically instead of appointed. The 1990s saw a push towards further democratization of public art through art-by-committee procedures involving more community involvement and in this way hoped to foster a closer connection between the artist, his/her artwork and the public. This most recent trend in public art has led to another series of challenges in terms of how best to create art within the public sphere.

Despite there being a long-standing rift between public art and art (i.e. museum art or studio-practice) and although there are still significant hurdles public art has yet to overcome, it is possible and necessary to rescue public art from becoming “a history of intentions,” as this thesis’s epigraph laments. One way to do this is by developing a discourse that systematically exposes and pragmatically addresses the theoretical and practical challenges facing contemporary public artists, public art administrators, and the communities they hope to serve. This necessitates taking into consideration the various perspectives and goals of the parties involved in public art commissions and synthesizing the languages of artists, architects, bureaucrats, and the general public. Rather than trying to simply knock art off its pedestal and reclaim it as a public service, this thesis will confront the discrepancies between capitalist and democratic art ideals head-on and suggest practical solutions for realizing effective public artworks.

Using four case studies of artworks commissioned during the 1990s through New York City’s Public Art for Public Schools (PAPS) program, this thesis addresses the

distinctly social, political, and potentially pedagogical life of artworks designed especially for a public school environment. Created in 1989, PAPS is responsible for commissioning and overseeing the development, installation and conservation of permanent site-specific artworks made for the multifaceted (and constantly in-flux) communities of New York City public schools. Between 1989 and 1994 (in the wake of the culture war), PAPS commissioned over one hundred artists to create new site-specific artworks, by far the largest series of government-sponsored public art commissions since the WPA.³⁵ Despite this prolific output, relatively little has been written about the effectiveness of the PAPS commissioning process or the success of the artworks. This thesis aims to further assist in the desegregation of art from public life by analyzing what happened when the two spheres intersected within the microcosmic context of four New York City public schools in the 1990s, and what the lingering effects might be today. Based on this assessment, the conclusion of this thesis will offer suggestions for future public art endeavors. This thesis will establish a discourse that speaks to the unique issues relevant to contemporary public art by weighing the theoretical goals for introducing art into an academic environment against the real-world challenges of realizing a final artwork for a public school building.

In addition to the obvious fact that public art is intended to be “for the people,” there are many correlated defining characteristics that make it impossible to assess these artworks based on traditional art critical criteria. Like many contemporary government-sponsored public art programs, PAPS is based on a democratic art-by-committee process wherein community members are responsible for selecting an artist and have ample

³⁵ Finkelpearl, 355.

opportunity to question and make suggestions regarding his/her final work. The creative collaboration presumed by this system challenges the romantic notion that a true artist works in private and “makes his own system and his own symbols.”³⁶ The myth of the artist-genius expressing himself while sequestered in his studio is antithetical to the guiding principles and practicalities of public art initiatives. Judging artwork born of a public, democratic, and highly bureaucratic process based on criteria meant to evaluate studio-based practices is not only irrelevant, but counter-productive.

Other potentially problematic public art-issues include site-specificity and permanency. These two defining features of the public art genre raise practical concerns related to the context, materials, accessibility, liability and conservation of the final artwork that typically do not apply to art intended for private consumption. A public artist must take the following matters under consideration: how his/her project relates to the architecture of a specified site, how certain mediums will age over time (especially in a relatively uncontrollable environment such as a public school), and whether the subject matter or style of the artwork will remain relevant to the site five, ten, or fifty years after its installation. Since these issues are less crucial to works destined for museums, galleries, or private collections, they often present problems for artists and can effect how their final output is received and critiqued.

In addition to the material concerns related to public art, it is important to reiterate that artists working in this genre during the 1990s would have been aware that the “site” implicates the community’s needs and response as well as the geographic and physical specifications of the building. As *Tilted Arc* revealed, the conceptual challenge facing

³⁶ Marvin Heiferman, ed. *City Art: New York’s Percent for Art Program* (New York, NY: Merrell Publishers Ltd., 2005): 9-10.

public artists is not only the *site* (“an abstract location”), but also the *place* (“an intimate and particularized culture that is bound to a geographical region.”)³⁷ The teachers, students, parents, neighbors, alumni, and staff of a public school comprise the complex and transient “sited community” for PAPS projects.³⁸

One of the major challenges of this thesis will be to determine a way to appropriately measure and judge the relative successes of the PAPS program, an inherently fraught task. As mentioned above, there are numerous reasons why standard art critical indicators of success/failure do not apply to public artworks. According to Cameron Cartiere and Shelly Willis, co-editors of *The Practice of Public Art*, “Limited evaluation of artworks, commissioning processes, and programs are... contributing factors to the marginalization of public art. [And] lack of evaluation limits a public art practitioner’s ability to substantiate the value of public art in our society.”³⁹ Therefore, in order to constructively discuss the role of public art in the New York City public school system—what function it serves and how—it is necessary to outline the genre’s overarching goals and create a rubric for determining whether or not a particular project lives up to its potential. Michele Cohen, the founding director of PAPS, neatly summarized the ideal role (physical and conceptual) of artwork in a school environment in her 2009 tome *Public Art for Public Schools* as follows:

The art can communicate what often remains unarticulated in a building’s program of requirements, enlivening and enriching the school environment with symbolic content. Art inspires students and teachers and reaffirms the value of education. It can complement the curriculum, expanding upon history, literacy, science, or mathematics. Art can

³⁷ Kwon, 109.

³⁸ Kwon, 120.

³⁹ Cartiere and Willis eds., 2.

serve as a positive reflection of student identity and diversity. It can transform functional elements such as windows, fences, and gates into imaginary landscapes or heighten the school's role as the beacon in the community. The best artwork provokes or engages even the most restless student.⁴⁰

The goals Cohen puts forth for public art commissioned for a school setting are admirable, but also vague. Furthermore, Cohen only addresses one aspect of PAPS: the final artwork's effect on the school community. If the contemporary understanding of public art recognizes that in order to be successful, projects should stem from a communal effort, it is ineffective to evaluate PAPS projects solely based on how the final artwork measures up to the commissioning agency's lofty intentions.

According to John Dewey (whose philosophies on education and aesthetics from the early twentieth-century are still widely cited in art-education discourses today) when it comes to art, "No amount of ecstatic eulogy of finished works can of itself assist the understanding or generation of such works."⁴¹ Dewey relates a final artwork to an in-bloom flower, explaining, "Flowers can be enjoyed without knowing about the interactions of soil, air, moisture, and seeds of which they are the result. But they cannot be understood without taking these interactions into account."⁴² Dewey's insistence that education is necessary to make art accessible (and by extension, successful) is particularly prescient with regard to contemporary public art.

Perhaps more so than other artistic outputs, public art is born out of a complex formula of interactions. During the development of a PAPS project, the architects of the new school building, the principal, teachers, students, parents, art professionals,

⁴⁰ Cohen, 9-10.

⁴¹ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York, NY: Perigee Books, 1980): 12.

⁴² Ibid.

community leaders, and art critics are all invited to express their opinions about what the artwork commissioned for a specific New York City public school should be. The community is represented by a diverse conglomeration of concerned parties who are each responsible in some way for the nature and design of the final artwork. Following Dewey's logic that context is essential to understanding art, all of the conversations and decisions that occur between the various parties involved at each decision-making stage of the PAPS process (artist selection, design approvals, fabrication, installation, and reaction) are integral in terms of assessing the overall success of a final project. Thus, in addition to measuring installed PAPS artworks according to the goals outlined in the above mission statement, this thesis will also carefully consider the advice and opinions (practical and conceptual) expressed by the multifaceted public responsible for shaping and also receiving the final artwork.

Unlike more cursory evaluations of public art, this paper aims to create a practical discourse that can be put to use when realizing future public art projects. I will explore in detail all stages of the PAPS program to formulate a comprehensive perspective on how this particular public art program functions and produces artwork. Each of the four case studies, which comprise the major content of this thesis, will begin by describing the project's origin, including the make-up of the community which the art is intended to serve, the architectural specifications and/or limitations of the site, the budget allocated to fund the artwork, and the artist-selection process. The procedures for obtaining project approvals, submitting redesigns, fabricating the artwork, and its final installation will also be outlined and critiqued. Finally, this thesis examines and evaluates each project's

unveiling and afterlife—what happens once PAPS artworks are entrusted into the care of individual schools.

The four selected case studies reflect the diverse scale, scope and style of PAPS projects. Rather than attempting to cull similar projects for the sake of consistency, the projects presented reflect the fact that the projects commissioned for New York City’s public schools “have been particularly rich and varied.”⁴³ One reason for this diversity is that the artists themselves come to PAPS from a variety of backgrounds and have varying degrees of related experience. The artists whose work is discussed in this paper range from a well-known art world luminary with no experience making permanent site-specific work for the “public” (Carrie Mae Weems) to a professional team of career public artists that boasts an extensive resume of public commissions, but is relatively unknown outside the public art arena (Bill and Mary Buchen.) There is an artist who explicitly expressed aversion for the art-by-committee process and refused to work in conjunction with architects of the school building (Dennis Adams.) And by contrast, there is also a collaborative team that invited the school community to participate directly in creating the final artwork and also collaborated creatively with the school architects to incorporate their artwork directly into the structure of the new building (Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzler.)

Not surprisingly, the four final projects run the gamut in terms of style, content, material, location, and reception. In addition to aesthetic and conceptual variety, the four case studies also speak to the great cultural and socio-economic diversity of New York City public schools. Four out of the five boroughs are represented, and each school

⁴³ Cohen, 18.

project belongs to a unique community, ranging from an underperforming high school in the relatively poor neighborhood of Knightsbridge in the Bronx (Walton High School) to a high-profile specialized magnet high school that was built as part of Manhattan's posh Battery Park City urban development plan (Stuyvesant High School.) There are so many variables specific to each public art commission, it would be impossible to create a guide that addresses every potential problem. However, for all of the significant differences represented by these four case studies, in each instance there is much to be learned which will be relevant and applicable to many public art commissions.

Art in Schools

A love of art helps the learning process. It helps you learn. All studies tell us that.
--Alan K. Simpson⁴⁴

New York City schools house one of the largest public art collections in the world.⁴⁵ PAPS, the city agency currently charged with maintaining this vast art collection (currently comprised of an impressive 1500+ original artworks) as well as commissioning new works derives from a longstanding and widely accepted assumption that art in schools has a positive effect on the educational environment.⁴⁶ Although there has been serious opposition to allocating tax dollars to pay for art in schools during PAPS's relatively short history (most notably in 1996 when Governor Pataki called for a halt in buying and commissioning artwork for New York City public schools, citing that the money would be "better spent on [school] repairs") in general, teachers, administrators, parents, scholars, agree that art is a welcome, if not vital, component of the school environment.⁴⁷ It is relatively rare that contemporary public art projects have such an overwhelmingly welcoming context and perceived function, and this is one of the reasons why the PAPS program was chosen as a the basis for analysis in this thesis.

More than any of the other building projects that stand to benefit from Percent for Art funding (post offices, police precincts, or libraries, for example) public schools

⁴⁴ From Senator Alan K. Simpson's 1997 Nancy Hawks Lecture at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C.

⁴⁵ Winnie Hu, "Schools Adopt Art as Building Block of Education: A Movement to Turn Walls into Show-and-Tell Lessons," *The New York Times* (1 October 2009): A24

⁴⁶ New York City Department of Education, Public Art for Public Schools website <<http://schools.nyc.gov/community/facilities/PublicArt/default.htm>> (accessed 30 April 2010).

⁴⁷ "A Time Capsule: Artworks in the School," *The New York Times*, 12 May 1996, Sec. 1, 31 <<http://www.nytimes.com/1996/05/12/nyregion/a-time-capsule-artworks-in-the-school.html?pagewanted=1>> (accessed 15 April 2010).

represent a setting wherein the role of art has long been romanticized. In America today, schools are considered sacred places—universally seen as beacons of hope and promise for the future. Describing the mission of the WPA/FAP in the 1930s, Thaddeus Clapp went so far as to suggest that “schoolrooms...can take the place once held by the churches as repositories for works of art and can reach a broader public than can be reached by the churches today...”⁴⁸ Art in schools is not only an obvious way in which contemporary society can attest to the high value placed on education, but it is also a way to acclimate young minds to visual culture. Schools represent one of the few places where art and public life continue to intersect on a fundamental (secular) level.

Within the past hundred years, numerous theorists, politicians, teachers, parents, artists, and bureaucrats have made various arguments in support of integrating art into the school environment. In the nineteenth century social progressives such as John Ruskin argued that art in schools would not only provide an attractive environment for learning, but that the artwork itself would help inspire students creatively, minimize disruptive behavior, and encourage academic learning.⁴⁹ Institutionalized support for this philosophy dates back to 1897, when the US Commission of Education published four primary themes supporting the inclusion of artwork in schools:

- 1-Artwork will provide moral uplift
- 2-Children respond to their surroundings
- 3-Art supports the teaching of other subjects
- 4-Children should be cultivated to become future art patrons, and furthermore, when taste is installed at an early age, American citizens will demand improved design.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Cohen, 27.

⁵⁰ Cohen, 28-29.

This rationale suggests that art can play a crucial role in students' social and academic development, and is not so far removed from PAPS's guiding principal that "art can communicate what often remains unarticulated in a building's program of requirements, enlivening and enriching the school environment with symbolic content."⁵¹

In the 1930s, Dewey, a great proponent of learning through direct interaction with art objects, put forth convincing and highly influential arguments in favor of including original artwork in school settings. Dewey wrote extensively on this topic, arguing quite simply, that "art communicates moral purpose and education."⁵² In addition to suggesting that art greatly benefited schools' pedagogical mission, Dewey also promoted a more general democratization of art. His theories on how and why this should be done had a tremendous impact on the guiding principles of the most notable attempt to reintegrate art into public life in America, the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project. The WPA/FAP was created in 1935 as a means to nurture the creation of art (and provide jobs for artists), but also was intended to foster a public audience for art. As mentioned earlier, one of the ways in which the WPA/FAP hoped to reintroduce art to the American masses that had never set foot inside a museum was by putting art in schools. The extensive public service program provided schools with original and reproductions of artworks including: murals, prints, documentary photographs, map drawings, diagrams, dioramas and models as a way to reintegrate art into public life.⁵³ Although the WPA/FAP had a much wider agenda than PAPS does today, one of the key ways in

⁵¹ Cohen, 8-10.

⁵² Patricia Goldblatt, "How John Dewey's Theories Underpin Art and Art Education," *Education and Culture* (2006) <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/eandc/vol22/iss1/art4>> (accessed 15 April 2010)

⁵³ O'Connor, ed., 39.

which the WPA/FAP aimed to benefit society was through a direct experience of art in the context of an educational environment.

The type and style of artwork included in schools have transformed radically over the years, moving from plaster models of classical sculptures and mass-produced prints of historically “important” paintings (which were commonly found in classrooms at the end of the nineteenth-century), to the custom designed stained-glass windows and large-scale murals commissioned through the WPA/FAP during the 1930s, to the multi-media and interactive installations of the 1990s. And yet the theoretical discussions and political decisions promoting artwork in schools as justifiable, if not wholly essential, have remained largely unchanged. In 1988 the National Education Association (NEA) put out a report describing the purported positive impacts that art can have on education, which echoes the 1897 Commission of Education. This report, titled “Towards Civilization,” lists four benefits of art in schools:

- (a) Gives students a sense of civilization
- (b) Develops their creativity
- (c) Develops effective communication skills and
- (d) Gives students tools for making critical choices and assessments.⁵⁴

Though the language has morphed somewhat over the past hundred years, the general expectation that art improves the learning environment by cultivating creativity and refining academic and social skills has remained remarkably consistent. Reinforcing the role of art in schools in the twenty-first century, New York City’s mayor Michael Bloomberg said quite simply, “The skills that children develop through the arts—the ability to think critically and creatively and understand abstract concepts—are more

⁵⁴ Tom Anderson, “Critical Appreciation Through Art” *Studies in Art Education* (1990): 132.

important than ever.”⁵⁵ Ironically (and unfortunately), despite having a long history of great champions, there has been a steady attrition in art education in American public schools.⁵⁶

Despite the popular support and strong historic and philosophical roots upholding the beneficial effects of having art in schools, the task of measuring the educational impact of any given PAPS project is confounded by the fact that the connection between the presence of art and a higher quality of education has yet to be substantiated with empirical evidence. The quote at the beginning of this section by Senator Alan Simpson (“A love of art helps the learning process. It helps you learn. All studies tell us that.”) is dynamic and appealing, but also apocryphal—there are in fact no studies that tell us how art helps students learn. Researchers have tried through numerous studies to find tangible evidence that art has a measurable effect on students’ performances, but as of yet, there is no conclusive evidence showing why or how this is true. In paper published in the *Journal of Aesthetic Education* in 2000, co-authors Ellen Winner and Monica Cooper explained that it has never been, and possibly will not ever be proven that art has any measurable positive impact on learning. Winner and Cooper explain:

We searched exhaustively for all relevant studies (published in English) that appeared from 1950 to 1998. We were unable to find any experimental studies that provided a test of which causal mechanism might underlie academic improvement as a function of arts study.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Cohen, 7.

⁵⁶ James Bea Graves, *Cultural Democracy: The Arts, Community and the Public Purpose* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005): 131.

⁵⁷ Ellen Winner and Monica Cooper, “Mute Those Claims: No Evidence (Yet) for a Crucial Link between Arts Study and Academic Achievement?” *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Autumn – Winter, 2000, 14.

Similarly, Elliot Eisner, a Stanford University professor who has written extensively about the role art plays in education, warns that is unproductive to make “research claims about the effects of art education on, say, academic forms of performance for which there is littler of weak research evidence.”⁵⁸ That said, Eisner maintains that with regard to art in schools it is possible to “measure without evaluation, evaluate without testing, and assess without grading.”⁵⁹ It is in this spirit that this thesis will attempt to assess the value and success of the current PAPS program. Although it is futile to look for quantifiable outcomes such as improvements in students’ GPAs or standardized test scores, this thesis will evaluate the program based on the position that “the arts [in schools] deserve a justification on their own grounds.”⁶⁰ In other words, on the grounds that the immeasurable qualities that art brings to the educational environment (civilization, creativity, critical thinking, visual communication skills, etc.) are, in and of themselves, very much worth exploring and analyzing.

⁵⁸ Elliott Eisner, *The Arts and the Creation of the Mind* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002): 42.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 189.

⁶⁰ Winner and Cooper, 66.

Percent for Art and Public Art for Public Schools

In 1982 the New York City Council passed the “Percent for Art” law (Local Law 65.)⁶¹ The law requires that one percent of the budget for eligible City-wide construction projects (including renovations) be allocated towards art for those buildings, which include: courthouses, clinics, detention centers, firehouses, hospitals, parks, passenger terminals, police precincts, prisons, sanitation facilities, and schools.⁶² In terms of money allocated, “Percent for Art” is a bit of a misnomer. In many cases, the budget for artwork does not represent one percent of the overall construction cost. The law requires that no less than one percent of the first twenty-million dollars, plus no less than one half of one percent of the amount exceeding twenty million dollars be allocated for artwork, but the budget for art can be capped at \$400,000.⁶³ The purpose of the “Percent for Art,” legislature, which became official on September 15, 1983 was to

Ensure that a percentage of the capital budget appropriated for the construction of substantial reconstruction of certain city-owned public buildings or structures shall be allocated for the inclusion of works of art on or around the exterior of such buildings or structures, or in the interior areas where the public has general access. Further, it is the intention of this legislation to assure that public works are undertaken with the full recognition of the aesthetic impact they have on the surrounding community, that they are designed to enhance the neighborhood in which they are located, that they bring pride to our citizens, and that they celebrate and encourage the arts, the creative talent of living artists and the existing art treasures that make New York City the world’s cultural capital.⁶⁴

⁶¹ “NYC Percent for Art Program: FAQs” *New York City Department of Cultural Affairs*

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Notice of Adoption of Regulations for the Implementation of Chapter 9, Section 234, of the Charter – Percent for Art Law (Office of the Mayor of New York City, August 10, 1983)

The adoption of the “Percent for Art” law spurred an enormous boom beginning in the late-1980s and lasting through the mid-1990s, of public art projects commissioned in New York City. During this period there were a lot of construction projects underway in New York City including many public schools. This is not surprising considering that New York City has the largest public school system in the country, with over 1.1 million students, 80,000 teachers, and 1,500 schools.⁶⁵ In order to oversee the construction of all new school facilities (as well as the renovation of many that were in dire need of repair) the City created the School Construction Authority (SCA) in 1988.⁶⁶ This specialized city agency was intended to dedicate attention and resources to public schools and was designed to be exempt from certain regulatory reviews that other capital building projects were subjected to, notably the Department of Cultural Affairs’ Design Committee.⁶⁷ The following year, in 1989, the Public Art for Public Schools program (PAPS), a joint effort between the Department of Education (DOE) and the Department of Cultural Affairs (DCA), was established to oversee the art commissions for schools eligible for “Percent for Art” funding, and to take care of the sizeable existing art collection already housed in New York City’s public school buildings.⁶⁸ Together, Percent for Art and PAPS are responsible for managing the bureaucratic process of selecting artists for school building or renovation projects and oversee the design of the artwork. Once an artist (or artists) has been chosen for a project and his/her final design proposal approved by a committee,

⁶⁵ Cohen, 8.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 162.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 172.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 157.

PAPS alone is responsible for managing the processes of fabrication though final installation and conservation of the artwork.

The following is a description of the PAPS process for commissioning artists and overseeing the design, fabrication and installation of artworks in the 1990s. The system remains largely unchanged today. This information is based on primary sources—attendance at artist selection panels, files kept at the archives of New York City’s School Construction Authority, conversations with PAPS administrators, and interviews with artists who have been commissioned to produce artwork through the Percent for Art/PAPS program.

The registry:

The PAPS process typically begins with the Percent for Art Image Registry, which represents work by hundreds of artists who have submitted images in order to be eligible for commission sponsored by the City of New York. The registry is open to all professional visual artists and there is no residency requirement for a Percent for Art Commission.⁶⁹ Whenever a construction or renovation project for a “city-owned public buildings or structures” is initiated, the Percent for Art office is in charge of organizing an artist selection panel.⁷⁰ Typically by the time the art allocation has been determined for any given project, an architect has already been assigned and, in some cases,

⁶⁹New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, “Percent for Art: Image Registry Form,” <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcla/html/panyc/form.shtml> (accessed 1 April 2010)

⁷⁰ Notice of Adoption of Regulations for the Implementation of Chapter 9, Section 234, of the Charter – Percent for Art Law (Office of the Mayor of New York City, August 10, 1983)

preliminary designs even construction may have already begun.⁷¹ To prepare for the selection panel, the director of Percent for Art (with help from his or her staff) combs through the registry and culls a group of artists. The panel, which is comprised of various parties each representing a larger group with a vested interest in community-based project, is shown five to ten images of work by the artists selected by Percent for Art. Based on the image presentations the panel narrows down the list of finalists who will compete to win the art commission.

In some cases Percent for Art may also consider artists not in the registry. For instance, the architect assigned to a project or another party involved with the school may recommend that a certain artist be considered for the commission. In the case that the artist suggested is not already in the registry, s/he will be contacted by Percent for Art and asked to provide slides. The current Deputy Director of Percent for Art at the time of this thesis (2010), Kelly Pajek, estimates that she combs through the registry two or three times per year to get a sense of which artists are currently interested in a public commission (if slides are not updated after three years, the Percent for Art office has the right to dispose of that artist's file).⁷² In addition to the artists included in the registry, according to Pajek, "Percent [for Art] is looking at artists who come to mind for a certain project for whatever reason for that particular site and [the architect or the school, for example] may also have suggestions."⁷³

Panels:

⁷¹ Heiferman, ed., 16.

⁷² "Percent of Art: Image Registry Form"

⁷³ Kelly Pajek (Deputy Director Percent for Art, New York City Department of Cultural Affairs), interview with the author, 7 October 2009.

For PAPS commission, the voting panel is generally comprised of the Commissioner of Cultural Affairs' designee (usually the Director of the Percent for Art Program, who also acts as the artist selection panel Chair), a representative from the sponsoring City agency (SCA), a representative from the architecture firm assigned to the project, and one or two representatives from the community (for instance, the school principal, a teacher, a member of the parents' association, an alumni, or a neighborhood resident), and one or two art professionals (an artist, museum worker, gallerist, or historian, preferably from the borough or community where the project will be installed.) At the first panel meeting, the panelists are shown the images of artists (typically between five and ten per artist) who have been pre-selected by Percent for Art. The panel looks at as many as one-hundred images and, after much discussion and debate, narrows the selection down (through a series of votes) to a list that includes several finalists as well as a few alternates. Based on this list, the Percent for Art staff contacts the finalists and invites them to make a presentation in front of the panel. In the case that one or more of the finalists declines this opportunity, the alternates will be contacted as necessary.

Also at the first artist selection panel meeting, the architects make a presentation indicating which areas of the new or renovated building they believe to be best suited for art. From the earliest stages of the PAPS commission process, the architects wield significant power over the types of artworks commissioned as well as the ways in which the art is ultimately integrated into the design of the building. One of the goals of the PAPS program (and one of its greatest challenges) is to foster a positive symbiotic relationship between the artists and architects hired to work on school project. An ideal PAPS project has been described by Michele Cohen as one that stems from a positive

relationship between the artist and the architect and which develops into “mutual aesthetic understanding that can lead to a more holistic collaboration.”⁷⁴ In this respect PAPS is similar to earlier art/architecture cohesions, such as the Bauhaus model, which understood the ultimate aim of all visual arts to be the “complete building” wherein “architects, painters and sculptors... recognize...and grasp the composite character of a building as an entity and in its separate parts.”⁷⁵ In a 2010 document, New York City’s DCA echoes Walter Gropius’s belief that art and architecture should be harmonious, positing that, “by bringing artists into the design process, the City’s civic and community buildings are enriched.”⁷⁶

The second time the panelists meet, the selected artists (the finalists) each present their work in person. At this point the artists are not yet expected to have developed specific proposals for the commission; rather this is an opportunity for them to convey a general artistic vision and address questions the panelists may have about how they would approach making artwork for the school, if ultimately awarded the commission. The goal at this stage is for the panelists to decide on an artist (or artists) whom they feel will come up with a proposal that best suits the needs and desires of the community in question. Percent for Art’s democratic process artist selection process is intended as a way to ensure that the City does not promote any one particular artistic theme or style by giving citizens the opportunity to “commission artwork of the highest quality, executed in a wide range of mediums, [to be] integrated into, and responsive to, the community and

⁷⁴ Cohen, 226.

⁷⁵ Éva Forgács, *The Bauhaus Idea and Bauhaus Politics* trans. John Bãtki (New York, NY: The Central European University Press, 1991): 27.

⁷⁶ New York City Department of Cultural Affairs “NYC Percent for Arts Program FAQs,” <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcla/html/panyc/faq.shtml> (accessed 5 April 2010).

the site.”⁷⁷ The panel, which is intentionally comprised of diverse constituents—who by design will not have the same notions about what the artwork for the site should be—must come to an agreement on which artist(s) they feel will do the best job once awarded the commission. When a school construction has a relatively large art allocation (\$200,000-400,000), it is quite common that the PAPS panel will decide to split the commission between two or more artists, who will work independently of one another to create artworks.

Artist selection:

The need for consensus amongst diverse constituents voting on an artist for a particular PAPS commission means that the artists typically selected are those who show “flexibility, inventiveness, and a genuine interest in interaction [with the panelists and the greater community.]”⁷⁸ As a rule, the type of artists predisposed to do well in the art-by-committee selection process are those who show the following traits: potential for working with the architect and the community; openness to feedback and questions from the panel and community; and an understanding of the bureaucratic process of developing the final artwork.⁷⁹ Working with the community and getting the panel to approve designs is an essential (and distinguishing) aspect of the PAPS program. The artists who take on these commissions must understand their role as a public artist and how this differs from their studio practice. The panel’s decisions are based as much on an artist’s personality and professionalism as on his/her portfolio of past works.

⁷⁷ Cohen, 157.

⁷⁸ Heiferman, ed., 17.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 17.

The following statements by George Segal and Richard Serra are useful in that they demonstrate the wide spectrum of artists who have created work for a public setting in terms of their vision of what public art should be. Describing his turn towards public art after a long career making work for gallery and museum shows, Segal said in 1981,

Now I have to take people's feelings into account...I don't have to apologize for having my own opinions, but I do have to start thinking on levels other than my own...The question is whether you can maintain the density of your subject matter, a decently high level of thinking, and still be accessible to lots of people.⁸⁰

Articulating the precise opposite point of view, Serra, speaking around the time of the *Tilted Arc* controversy in the mid-1980s, simply said "Art is not democratic. It is not for the people."⁸¹ Although Serra was a revered artist at the time he received the commission for Federal Plaza, his attitude towards the "public" precluded the community playing an active role in the art ostensibly created to serve them. Furthermore, as Senie has pointed out, at the time when Serra was awarded to commission for Federal Plaza in 1979 already "he was a known artist with a history of controversy surrounding his public pieces," and the "public and critical responses to [his work] were familiar to those involved [with the commission.]"⁸² Segal, on the other hand, recognized that public art requires thinking on different levels and taking other people's opinions into account. When evaluating PAPS projects, an artist's personality and how s/he navigates the complex convoluted process of designing an artwork for a school community, is crucial to the overall "success" of a project. Artists who have the ability to work within the system and recognize the unique

⁸⁰ Knight, 131.

⁸¹ "Culture Shock: Visual Arts" *PBS.com*
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/cultureshock/flashpoints/visualarts/tiltedarct.html> (accessed 1 April 2010)

⁸² Senie, *The Tilted Arc Controversy*, 19.

needs and parameters of public art commissions will have a more fruitful experience, and generally speaking, turn out more relevant work, than those who want to extend their studio practice onto public property. Not all artists are necessarily well suited for the democratic ideals and bureaucratic processes inherent to public art.

Contracts:

Once an artist's proposal has been approved, s/he enters into a contract with the City.

The PAPS contract is a lengthy legal document outlining the parameters in which the artist must agree to work if s/he wishes to participate in a city-funded project. In most cases, an artist selected for a PAPS commission has no previous experience with a legal document of this nature. To give an example of the high level of responsibility PAPS places directly onto the artist, consider these passages from the boilerplate contract. The PAPS contract states that the artist shall:

- Be responsible for the design, fabrication, delivery, and unless otherwise specified herein, installation of Artwork for the Project.
- Furnish all services and pay all costs associated with the design, fabrication, delivery and installation of Artwork, including all supplies, labor, material and equipment necessary for the fabrication, delivery and installation of the Artwork.
- The Artist shall at his or her own expense obtain all permits, licenses and approvals required (including any seal certifying the structural soundness and safety of the work which may be required.)⁸³

This contract holds the artist responsible for managing the design and sub-contracting out the fabrication of the artwork. When working on a \$400,000 commission, the expenses that an artist is expected to pay out of pocket can be financially devastating. Additionally,

⁸³ PAPS contract obtained from the Public Art for Public Schools archive at the School Construction Authority headquarters, Queens, New York.

the PAPS contract requires the artist to deal with legal permits and holds the artist liable if certain damages or even injury related to his/her artwork occur during fabrication and/or installation. These responsibilities (financial and legal) present an intimidating situation for an artist who is uninitiated to the world of government sponsored public art.

Fabrication and Installation:

In the case of many PAPS projects, the nature of a permanent site-specific commission requires that the artist work with materials that are entirely new to him or her. The fact that the artwork is intended to be part of a large public building means the scale of the work will be generally much larger than work generated as part of the artist's typical (i.e. studio) practice. Furthermore, the mandate that the artwork be permanent requires using durable and/or archival materials that may also be unfamiliar to the artist. Researching and selecting appropriate materials, finding vendors able to fabricate large-scale pieces, and subcontracting industrial designers, are part of a steep learning curve for many first-time PAPS artists.

Having navigated all of this new terrain in order to successfully design a permanent public artwork, the artist is then also expected to participate in the installation of the final fabricated artwork. This involves another special skill-set: liaising with the general contractor who oversees the construction of the entire school building. Dealing with the general contractor as well as unionized construction workers is often described by PAPS artists as being one of the most trying experiences of the entire process. When asked to describe the greatest challenges of the PAPS program in 2010, founding Director Michele Cohen singled out the experience of, "negotiating the [art] installation and

dealing with contractors [and] union.”⁸⁴ The artist and the general contractor tend to have differing ideas about how to get the art installed safely, correctly and efficiently. From the perspective of the general contractor and construction workers, the art is a non-essential (and potentially inconvenient) decorative element of the building. The artist, on the other hand, would like his/her work treated with the respect and care given to autonomous art objects.

Maintenance and outcomes assessments:

There is ample documentation available to assess the PAPS process up through the installation of an artist’s final artwork. The trajectory of each commission described in this paper—including moments of conflict and conciliation—can be traced in letters, design sketches, memos, and emails which are preserved in the School Construction Authority’s archives. What happens to the projects once they are unveiled, however, remains a bit of a mystery. PAPS is charged with overseeing the maintenance and restoration of all of the projects they commission, but constraints related to understaffing, limited funding, the complicated bureaucratic structure of the School Construction Authority and the fact that the PAPS collection contains over 1,500 artworks, means that it is often two or three years between site-visits to each school.⁸⁵ Unfortunately this leaves ample opportunity for PAPS artworks to break, be covered up, or even removed without anyone in a position to help knowing about it for quite some time. Furthermore,

⁸⁴ Michele Cohen (Founder and former Director of PAPS) interview with the author, 15 January 2010.

⁸⁵ NYC Department of Education “Public Art for Public Schools,” <http://schools.nyc.gov/community/facilities/PublicArt/default.htm> (accessed 1 April 2010)

even once a problem is reported, it can still take several more years for a resolution is reached. Finding sources of funding, contacting appropriate vendors for refabrication, or hiring art restorers to repair damages make the process of maintaining PAPS artworks lengthy and costly.

Aside from surveying and preserving the physical condition of the artworks, another major issue related to the afterlife of PAPS projects is whether or not the school community responds to, or makes use of, the artwork entrusted into their care. There are no standardized measures currently in place to assess the outcomes of the PAPS programs. Crucial questions such as: “what do PAPS artworks mean to the students, teachers and greater communities of the schools?” remain largely unanswered. Although this question is difficult to address, it holds the key to evaluating whether the PAPS program is effective. This thesis will conclude by discussing ways in which it is possible to establish the reaction of a school to a PAPS project once it has been unveiled.

* * *

Given the complexity of the PAPS process, there is great potential for problems to arise over the course of any given commission. It is tempting to concede that the fact that an artwork even makes it out of this overtaxed, highly bureaucratic city agency is a measurable success in and of itself. However, though the unveiling of a PAPS project is certainly a worthy cause for celebration, the fact alone that an artwork exists is not enough to justify the time, effort and money spent to create it or, by extension, uphold the mission statement of the commissioning agency. In short, the intentions of the PAPS program are not enough to justify the output. Only a thorough analysis of PAPS artworks,

based on how they are conceived and received, and how they function, can build compelling case for continuing the act of commissioning public art for schools. As critic Adam Gopnik put it in an essay on New York City's Percent for Art program: "Even if a program works (in the narrowest sense that work gets made) does it work in the more significant sense that some connection has been made between the public and the artist?"⁸⁶ If the answer is yes (the assumption that has supported public art initiatives for at least the past hundred years), these connections need to be studied closely, documented, and evaluated. In doing precisely this for four PAPS case studies, this thesis will attempt to demystify several broader public art issues, mainly: What is its function? Why is this function inadequately realized? And under what conditions is this function most successfully performed?⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Heiferman, ed., 10-11.

⁸⁷ Dewey, 12.

Case Studies*

**The primary sources cited in the following four case studies were accessed through the archives of New York City's School Construction Authority.*

Case Study #1: *Mnemonics*, 1992

Stuyvesant High School, Manhattan
Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzel, Artists

INTRODUCTION:

In 1987—two years before the creation of PAPS and four years after New York City’s Percent for Art program was instituted—a site in lower Manhattan was designated as the future home for a new facility for Stuyvesant High School.⁸⁸ The new Stuyvesant was to be the first public high school built in New York City in over ten years.⁸⁹ A magnet school specializing in mathematics, science and technology, Stuyvesant was founded in 1904 and had occupied a Beaux-Arts building designed by C. B. J. Snyder (chief designer for the Department of Education from 1891-1922 and one of the first proponents of public art in New York City schools) on East 15th Street since 1907.⁹⁰ The decision to relocate to lower Manhattan (345 Chambers Street) meant that the construction project was under the jurisdiction of the Battery Park City Authority (a public corporation created by New York State legislature in 1968 to develop Battery Park City as a residential and commercial community) in addition to being managed by the Departments of Education and Cultural Affairs.⁹¹ The development of Battery Park City was described by the New York Times in 1986 as “the largest and most expensive real estate venture ever undertaken in New York City” and a major aspect of the development was an

⁸⁸ “Percent for Art Projects Unveiled at Stuyvesant High School,” New York City Department of Cultural Affairs Press release, 12 May 1993.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Cohen, 32.

⁹¹ Ibid.

ambitious program for public art.⁹² Under New York City's Percent for Art law, it was determined that there would be a \$400,000 budget to commission original artwork(s) for the new Stuyvesant. Clearly a high profile project for the City, Stuyvesant's new building was envisioned as a way to bring the prestigious high school (Stuyvesant selects students based on a competitive examination and is recognized as one of the premier high schools in the United States) into the next century. The new facility would be equipped with state-of-the-art computer and science labs as well as two gymnasiums, a swimming pool, and an 850-seat multiple-use auditorium.⁹³

Based on several artist selection panels organized by the DCA, it was decided that the art budget would be split evenly between two commissions—one by Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzel (who have worked as artistic collaborators since 1985) and the other by Michelle Stuart.⁹⁴ The project that Jones and Ginzel eventually created is titled *Mnemonics* (1992) and consists of four hundred glass bricks containing various objects collected by the artists as well as by members of the Stuyvesant community (past, present, and future). These glass-block reliquaries are integrated directly into the walls of the school and interspersed throughout building. Since 1993, when the artwork was officially unveiled, *Mnemonics* has received wide praise—from politicians, bureaucrats,

⁹² Albert Scardino, "Big Battery Park City Dreams" *The New York Times*, 1 December 1986, sec. D, p. 1.

Rosalyn Deutsche, "Uneven Development: Public Art in New York City" *October*, Vol. 47 (Winter 1988): 30.

⁹³ Cohen, 161.

⁹⁴ Michelle Stuart's commission for Stuyvesant, *Tabula* (1992), is comprised of forty-two marble panels, ten of which are etched, installed in the school's entry lobby along the main staircase. The panels bear the designs of flora, fauna, alphabets and maps that refer to the origins of human life and language.

(Michele Cohen, Memorandum re: Description of Artwork at Stuyvesant High School, sent to Doris Gonzalez-Light (Executive Assistant, Chancellor's Office) 18 March 1992.)

community members, and art critics. Michele Cohen, Founder of the PAPS program, credits *Mnemonics* with having “reinvigorated the conceptual approach to art in schools, offering ways public art can fit into a school building, and...[become a model] for subsequent projects.”⁹⁵

No matter how “successful” a project is deemed to be upon its initial installation and unveiling, what happens to it during its lifespan is of equal, if not greater, importance when evaluating the project’s overall success. What is particularly interesting about this case is that despite the fact that *Mnemonics* received a lot of praise and is credited as setting a benchmark for future PAPS commissions, major complications arose in the years following its installation. Issues related to maintenance, vandalism, and general disinterest on the part of Stuyvesant’s administration and students, seriously compromised the project in the years after its unveiling. The situation became so bad that it required intervention at various points by the artists, PAPS administrators, the architects, the school principal, as well as Stuyvesant students and alumni. An analysis of the more than two-decade trajectory of the *Mnemonics* project indicates how permanent public artworks often require support especially after they have been fabricated and installed. Although *Mnemonics* showed great promise and deserves credit for paving the way for other participatory PAPS projects, this case study is also a lesson in what to avoid in future projects.

⁹⁵ Cohen, 158.

BEGINNING STAGES: ARTIST SELECTION & PROJECT APPROVALS:

On June 21, 1988 the DCA hosted an initial meeting (no-voting) to discuss the Stuyvesant High School construction project and “develop ideas for art work, sites, and artists.”⁹⁶ Those present included representatives from the DCA (including members of the Art Commission and Percent for Art), the Battery Park City Authority (BPCA), the DOE, Community Board #1, the Stuyvesant Coalition (a parent/alumni organization affiliated with the school) and individuals involved in the art world including art historian Aimee Brown-Price and Agnes Gund of Studio in a School. The architects (who had already been hired to design the new school building) Cooper Robertson & Partners and Gruzen Samton Steinglass, presented their plans and displayed a model of the new school building. Regarding the impending art commission, the Stuyvesant Coalition suggested that there could be an opportunity to salvage artifacts from the original C. B. J. Snyder building and somehow incorporate these into the new school’s decoration in order to “evoke a spirit of the old building and its historic identity in the new building.”⁹⁷

The first official artist selection panel reconvened one month later on July 18, 1988 to review potential sites for art at Stuyvesant and also to look at slides by ninety contemporary artists. The list of artists had been compiled based on recommendations from Percent For Art, the panelists, and advisors.⁹⁸ The panelists included Linda Blumberg (DCA), Aimee Brown-Price (art historian), Agnes Gund (Studio in the School), Mary Miss (artist), Amanda Burden (BPCA), Henry Gazess (DOE), Joe Lengeling (Cooper Robertson and Partners, architect), Mario La Ross (DOE), Sydney

⁹⁶ “Minutes from Artist Selection Panel: Stuyvesant High School New York City Department of Cultural Affairs (21 June 1988).

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

Druckman (BPCA), David Sanders (BPCA), Renee Levine (Stuyvesant Coalition), Peggy Harvey (Stuyvesant Coalition), Ellen Reissman (Stuyvesant Coalition), Karen McCree (Manhattan Borough President's Office), Hal Bromm (Community Board #1), Jennifer McGregor Cutting (Percent for Art), Mary Prevo (Percent for Art), and Missy Nesbitt (Percent for Art.)⁹⁹ After viewing all of the slides, the panel voted and narrowed down the list to thirty-eight artists whose work would be reviewed again at the next meeting.

Following the slide review, the possibility of preserving the spirit of the old Stuyvesant and bringing it to the new building was raised again. The Minutes indicate that there was a suggestion that this could be achieved through documentary architectural photographs, but that some panelists voiced the opinion that it “was not appropriate to give the artist a specific documentary assignment.”¹⁰⁰ The panel Chair, Linda Blumberg (DCA), reiterated the goal of Percent for Art commissions as being to “foster original and creative projects” and not impose concepts on artists.¹⁰¹ Blumberg also reassured the panel by explaining that the selected artist would be encouraged to work with the community and Stuyvesant High School on his/her project.¹⁰²

On September 8, 1988 the panelists reconvened to take a second look at the work by the thirty-eight previously selected artists. The list of those under consideration at this stage included renowned artists such as Red Grooms, Ed Ruscha, William Eggleston, Jenny Holzer, Anish Kapoor, and Sol Le Witt. Percent for Art explained that interviews with artists would only be arranged if the panel was unable to choose an artist (or small

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ “Minutes from Artist Selection Panel: Stuyvesant High School,” New York City Department of Cultural Affairs (18 July 1988).

¹⁰² Ibid.

selection of artists) for the commission based on slide reviews alone. Following the slide presentation a preliminary vote by the panel discussed the possibility of splitting the commission between two or more artists. Due to budget constraints the panel Chair recommended that no more than two artists be selected. Based on an initial vote, panel narrowed down the list of potential artists to twenty. Another second vote resulted in the selection of seven artists: Cynthia Carlson, Kate Ericson & Mel Ziegler, Kristin Jones & Andrew Ginzel, Andrew John Leicester, Richard Pare, Ed Ruscha, and Michelle Stuart. Blumberg (DCA) voiced support for splitting the \$400,000 allocation between two artists at the discretion of the panel, but recommended not selecting more than two artists to share the commission.¹⁰³

The Minutes from this meeting note strong opinions voiced by several constituents involved in the artist selection process. For example, the Stuyvesant Coalition expressed concern about the aesthetic style of the commissioned artwork—putting forth the opinion that “Modern art” would quickly look dated and would not be appropriate for the school.¹⁰⁴ And, the Battery Park City Authority¹⁰⁵ urged that the panel to consider an artist who would work directly with Stuyvesant students through workshops or lectures related to the art project. ¹⁰⁵ Percent for Art made it clear that that the panel’s role was to create parameters for the art commission, but not to dictate specific requirements. It was noted that the final artwork would have to be approved by the city agencies responsible for the project (DOE and the Battery Park City Authority) as well as vetted by the DCA’s Art Commission before being fabricated. On September 23, 1988

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

the panel met again and, through a series of votes, produced a final list of candidates: Kate Ericson & Mel Ziegler, Kristin Jones & Andrew Ginzel, Edward Ruscha, and Michelle Stuart. During this voting session, there was unanimous support from the panelists in favor of Michelle Stuart. It was therefore decided that she would be offered half of the Percent for Art Commission. The panel agreed that in order to settle on who was to receive the second half of the commission, artist interviews would be necessary.¹⁰⁶

On November 28, 1988 the artist selection panel reconvened for a final vote. In addition to the voting panelists, approximately a dozen other “advisors” including representatives from the Art Commission, Department of Education, Battery Park City Authority, Stuyvesant Coalition, Manhattan Borough President’s Office, and Community Board #1 were in attendance for this final artist selection panel.¹⁰⁷ The artists invited to present before the panel were Kristin Jones & Andrew Ginzel, Kate Ericson & Mel Ziegler, and Ed Ruscha. Based on the artists’ presentations, the panel voted to award the second \$200,000 commission for Stuyvesant High School to the collaborative team of Jones and Ginzel.¹⁰⁸ In an interview published in 2001, Ginzel described his experience presenting in front of the artist selection panel for the new Stuyvesant High School, saying, “We were asked to interview without creating any kind of proposal, although we were asked in a general way how we might approach the school.”¹⁰⁹

Jones and Ginzel’s official offer of the Stuyvesant commission came in a letter dated December 13, 1988 from Mary Schmidt Campbell, Commissioner of the DCA. In

¹⁰⁶ “Minutes from Artist Selection Panel: Stuyvesant High School” New York City Department of Cultural Affairs (23 September 1988).

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Finkelparl, 355.

this letter Campbell advised that, if they were to accept the commission, Jones and Ginzel would be working closely with Mary Prevo (then the Acting Director of the Percent for Art Program) as well as with the architect, Stuyvesant Coalition, DOE and the community of the new high school. Campbell's letter reminded the artists that, "The panel recognized that the commissioned work is for the students as well as the community and therefore, the selected artist should be sensitive to their needs."¹¹⁰ In addition to confirming the \$200,000 budget, the letter also outlined precisely what this sum was intended to cover: artist's design fee, signage, insurance, labor, materials, transportation, and installation of the artwork. A preliminary timeline stated that construction was set to begin in July 1989 and expected to be complete by May 1991 (in time for a September 1991 dedication). Jones and Ginzel accepted the commission; looking back on this decision they admitted, "we had never been faced with a challenge such as this, with a directive to create a work that was meant to last, to endure 100 years."¹¹¹

Just over a year after Jones and Ginzel received this commission, Percent for Art arranged a "Kick-off Meeting" to formally introduce the key parties involved in the Stuyvesant High School project.¹¹² In addition to the artists, those present included the architects, representatives from the DOE, the Battery Park City Authority, the Stuyvesant Coalition and DCA. It was decided at this meeting that the artists would tour Stuyvesant's current school building as well as the Battery Park City area that would be

¹¹⁰ Mary Schmidt Campbell, Commissioner Department of Cultural Affairs, Letter to Kristen Jones and Andrew Ginzel (13 December 1988).

¹¹¹ Finkelpearl, 356.

¹¹² "Minutes from Kick-off Meeting: Stuyvesant High School" New York City Department of Cultural Affairs (18 January 1989).

home to the new school building. Following this directive (and perhaps picking up on what had been reiterated again and again by the Stuyvesant Coalition during the artist selection panels about the importance of preserving an essence of the original building in the new school) Jones and Ginzel ended up spending a great deal of time at the C. B. J. Snyder building and found the “spirit of the school to be really contagious.”¹¹³ From the very early stages of the commission, the artists understood the original building to be very much a part of Stuyvesant’s identity as a school and a community. According to Ginzel,

...everyone kept on saying how they wished they could take a sense of the old school with them. Through all of this, we started developing this sense of addressing memory: the memory of the history of the world, the memory of the old school. We also wanted to project into the future, creating a point, a reference point in this history of the school, where one side is a reflection of the other, projecting something into the future while looking into the past.¹¹⁴

Based on these observations, Jones and Ginzel began to think about ways in which their artwork could incorporate the strong sense of history and school pride that impressed them as they toured the building and interacted with teachers, students and alumni.

With these ideas in mind, Jones and Ginzel reached out to the architectural team to discuss the Stuyvesant construction. Their primary contact was Joseph Lengeling of Cooper Robertson & Partners. Years later, Ginzel recalled his working relationship with Lengeling in a very positive manner:

When we were selected [to create a work of art for Stuyvesant], the building was in a relatively advanced planning stage, but many of the details were still pretty

¹¹³ Finkelpearl, 357.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 360.

open. We were introduced to Joe Lengeling, the project architect for Cooper Robertson, who was responsible for the building with Gruzen Samton Steinglass...Joe, luckily, was a very sympathetic figure who spent a lot of time with us, trying to explain how this very complicated machine of a building was going to work.¹¹⁵

Jones also expressed great appreciation for Lengeling adding,

We could sense that he was completely passionate about this project. And he was also completely open to the mystery of what we might do. He wasn't afraid of us as artists. He was really curious, and interested in working with us somehow.¹¹⁶

The mutually respectful and collaborative nature of Jones and Ginzel's relationship with the architects is one of the reasons *Mnemonics* is often touted as being successful. Based on the fact that PAPS promotes the Bauhaus-like integration of art into the overall design of the building, Jones and Ginzel can be considered ideal artists (in that they sought out a creative collaboration with the school architect.) This type of open and cooperative dialogue between artist and architect is not always possible for PAPS projects. A frequent complaint from artists who have worked on PAPS commissions is that they are brought into the process relatively late, typically after the architectural design has already been settled.

This timing often precludes making any modifications to accommodate artists' proposals, which would involve placing artwork within structural components of the building. Tom Finkelpearl, who as the Director of New York City's Percent for Art program from 1990 to 1996 witnessed first-hand many working relationships between artists and architects, describes this classic dilemma:

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 359.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

Percent for Art programs routinely create forced marriages between artists and architects. Architect and artist are almost always selected by different panels and often with very different ideas of what the site might need.¹¹⁷

Interestingly, despite the fact that it is a rarity that artists and architects have the opportunity to work together from the early stages of construction projects, the DCA's Art Commission is ostensibly very much in favor of integrating art into the overall architectural design of City projects. For example, the certificate issued to Jones and Ginzel by the Art Commission on December 18, 1989 giving "unanimous approval to the installation of 368 reliquaries" specifically praised the artists for how their artwork related to the architecture, stating "...the Commission applauds the proposal because of the integration of art and architecture within the building."¹¹⁸ Although the designs for the Stuyvesant building were well underway when Jones and Ginzel were commissioned to create an artwork, the artists took it upon themselves to develop a close working relationship with the architects and this ultimately resulted in an artwork which is physically incorporated into the school's structure. Since the installation of *Mnemonics*, PAPS has made efforts to bring artists in to the design process earlier on so that they can coordinate and discuss ideas with the architects before the blueprints are set in stone. However since the art allocation is often not determined until after the architect has been assigned to a school construction project and the designs already underway, it is often tricky to foster a true and fundamental integration of art and architecture—what Walter Gropius would consider a "complete building."¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 150.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Forgács, 27.

During the summer of 1989, while in residence at the Kunsthalle in Basel, Switzerland, Jones and Ginzel were in direct contact with architect Joe Lengeling of Gruzen Samton Steinglass to discuss their proposed art installation for Stuyvesant. In a letter to Lengeling dated July 11, 1989, Jones and Ginzel wrote:

From the start, we have felt that there is a mutual purpose to penetrate the building with, as it were, an unseen hand. We are not attempting to make work that speaks of ourselves, nor the art world for that matter... Rather, we are ...attempting to embrace the mystery of the unknown, the quest for knowledge: this, the purpose of this premier institution [Stuyvesant High School.]¹²⁰

It is clear from this letter that Jones and Ginzel were interested in sharing their artistic sensibility with the architect. The letter continued, “Joe, the feasibility of what we propose has everything to do with integrating the work into your process.”¹²¹ Based on this admission it is also evident that Jones and Ginzel understood that one of the keys to installing a successful artwork was to foster a close partnership and creative collaboration with the architects. Accompanying the letter to Lengeling was a preliminary proposal sketching out Jones and Ginzel’s initial ideas for their commission. The proposal described a project that would consist of 400 glass blocks, each of which would be filled with objects and dispersed throughout the building. 84 of these “reliquaries” would refer to one year of Stuyvesant High School’s history and 84 would be left empty for future years to fill with mementos. The remaining 232 blocks would be filled with a “wide range of collected samples of realities, or known facts. Materials such as sands from selected world deserts, water samples from various world oceans, lakes, the various

¹²⁰ Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzel, Letter to Joe Lengeling of Gruzen Samton Steinglass (11 July 1989).

¹²¹ Ibid.

tangible elements, mineral specimens, and so on.”¹²² Upon returning from Switzerland in the fall of 1989, Ginzler and Jones officially presented this idea to the DCA, Battery Park City Authority, DOE, and the Stuyvesant Coalition.

The official proposal was as follows:

The primary project would involve the random dispersal of glass-block reliquaries, scattered throughout the building within the matrix of the designated structural glazed facing tiles and glass blocks that line the hallways. These small vignettes will, we believe, develop a sense of wonder at the accumulative fragments of history, of knowledge and of the future....There would be three major categories, each would be identified with a sandblasted imprint.

The first category is a series of 84 collages, each referring to one year of Stuyvesant High School history: they will echo the past. We will seek clues, fragments, and acts that dramatize both the lore of Stuyvesant as well as resonate simultaneous events throughout the world.

The second category would serve to augment the sense of the unknown: the mystery and potential of the future. We will provide 84 vacant reliquaries, each sandblasted with a future year. These would be completed by coming generations of Stuyvesant graduates. These would be inset into the walls, but will be engineered with special fasteners so as to allow access.

The third group of reliquaries will consist of a wide range of collected samples of realities, or known facts and mysteries. Materials and fragments such as sands from selected world deserts-water samples from various world oceans and lakes, various tangible elements, mineral specimens, and so on.¹²³

With regard to filling the reliquaries, the artists described a campaign for collecting objects that would be undertaken in partnership with the Stuyvesant Coalition, the

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

school's History Club, as well as teacher and student volunteers. Jones and Ginzel explained that they would seek out additional objects with requests made to organizations such as the United States Information Service and NASA. Based on this proposal *Mnemonics* seemed to be an ideal model for a successful public art project for a public school, in many ways anticipating the goals that PAPS (which was founded the same year this proposal was made) would come to expect from its commissions. This proposal represents a thoughtful and inventive way of incorporating the community's desire to include artifacts from the old school building in the artwork, a potential for a seamless synthesis of artwork and architecture, and way in which to involve the present and future communities of the school.

INSTALLATION & REACTIONS:

Once their final proposal had been accepted, Jones and Ginzel embarked on perhaps the most ambitious aspect of their project: soliciting, collecting, and organizing the artifacts to be placed in the glass reliquaries. To begin, they drafted a letter to national ambassadors from around the world, asking for "one small significant fragment that can be woven into the fabric of [the new school building.]"¹²⁴ The solicitation, which was mailed along with a "Relics from Around the World/Ambassador Donation Form," which requested "A visual kernel of knowledge, something intrinsic and special from the country to which you are appointed. A fragment of a famous building, a mineral specimen, a few leaves from a sacred tree, water or sand from a certain river."¹²⁵ Ginzel

¹²⁴ Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzel, "Stuyvesant High School Project Description" (1992)

¹²⁵ Ibid.

estimates that they sent this request to approximately 1,200 people around the world.¹²⁶

In addition, Ginzel and Jones enlisted Stuyvesant's Alumni Association to help bring in memorabilia which was to be included in the reliquaries demarcating each graduated class. Of this process Jones remembers,

I think originally we imagined that each member of the Alumni Association would take a great deal of time and do it themselves. In fact, that is not what happened. We had a very hard time even getting the mailing list out of the Alumni Association, because they were sure we were going to sell it. So we kept getting a few more names and a few more names, and we eventually mailed out hundreds of letters.¹²⁷

Between the time they received commission and the unveiling of *Mnemonics* in 1993, Jones and Ginzel worked tirelessly with the Stuyvesant community. The artists ended up hiring students to help call and send letters to alumni, placed advertisements in the alumni newsletter, and spent a significant amount of time themselves combing through archives at the C. B. J. Snyder building. Of this period of intensive fieldwork, Ginzel recalled, "...since they were moving out of the old building, we got carte blanche to go through and chip off pieces of architecture, and unscrew railings, doorknobs, take numbers off doors, things like that."¹²⁸

Mnemonics was unveiled with great fanfare during a special dedication ceremony on May 25, 1993. A press release announcing the artwork described the reliquaries as "an encyclopedic treasure of relics, built into the walls throughout the ten-story

¹²⁶ Finkelpearl, 368.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 365.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 367.

building.”¹²⁹ In addition to explaining the origins of the blocks’ contents, the press release also stressed the artworks’ unique connection to the Stuyvesant community. “Eighty-eight other blocks evoke the legacy of Stuyvesant High School with a block for each year of the school’s history, while eighty-eight more are empty, announcing the future years up to the year 2080, awaiting artifacts within each glass block are identified with sandblasted inscriptions.”¹³⁰ The Department of Education also released a statement at the time of Stuyvesant’s grand opening, which included an enthusiastic quote from Amy Linden, Chief Executive for School Facilities:

The new artwork at Stuyvesant fulfills our hopes for all public art in school buildings. These pieces speak to students about the history of their school. They prompt inquiry and reflection, and add an element of beauty and surprise.¹³¹

Other praise for the Stuyvesant art commissions include the Commissioner of the Department of Cultural Affairs, Luis R. Cancel, who is quoted as having said, “The artworks at Stuyvesant High School are a prime example of how art can enrich a space. Skillfully woven into the architecture of the building, the artworks are an educational and aesthetic delight.”¹³² The Schools Chancellor Joseph A. Fernandez reportedly remarked,

We are very pleased with the artwork for Stuyvesant High School. In addition to adding to the beauty of the school, this artwork has special historical significance for alumni, students, and staff. Each graduating class will have an opportunity to add its own contribution to the fabric of the building.¹³³

¹²⁹ “Percent for Art Projects Unveiled at Stuyvesant High School,” New York City Department of Cultural Affairs Press release, 12 May 1993.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid.

Topping off all of this praise, *Mnemonics* was given an Art Commission Award for Excellence in Design.¹³⁴

Beyond the initial excitement, directly related to the unveiling of *Mnemonics*, the project continued to receive attention and praise. In March 1997 *Sculpture* magazine published an article by Patricia C. Phillips in which she lauded Jones and Ginzel's work for being "implicitly concrete and explicitly illusory."¹³⁵ Phillips described the reliquaries as a,

physical, site-based manifestation of a vast, diverse sense of knowledge. Like diminutive cabinets of curiosities, the receptacles suggest the slow, enigmatic processes of discovery and memory. *Mnemonics* powerfully expresses multiple concepts of history as well as the predictable and unaccountable dimensions of a future that Stuyvesant graduates will inherit and influence.¹³⁶

And in 2005, thirteen years after its unveiling, critic Eleanor Heartney posited that *Mnemonics* was still very much on trend regarding the current tendencies of the contemporary art movement writing:

As public art, the project is both unique and exemplary...*Mnemonics* relates to larger tendencies in the art world, moving away from artworks as precious objects in favor of the idea of art as experience."¹³⁷

It was not only the art world that took notice of *Mnemonics*. In 2006, Stuyvesant's school newspaper, the *Stuyvesant Spectator*, published an article about the project. The student reporter described the artwork writing,

¹³⁴ Heiferman, ed., 146.

¹³⁵ Patricia C. Phillips, "Making Memories," *Sculpture*, Vol. 16., No. 3 (March, 1997): 25.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Eleanor Heartney, "The City as Laboratory: Two Decades of New York's Percent for Art Program," in Heiferman (ed), 19.

Despite the fact that the boxes have been present in the new Stuyvesant building since it was first constructed in 1992, they never cease to heighten appreciation for certain aspects of Stuy culture...each relic box has its own story and with each person, a different interpretation. No matter how strange or arbitrary any box may seem, they all add a little something to Stuyvesant culture.¹³⁸

All of this praise—which comes from diverse constituencies and spans over a decade—indicates that *Mnemonics* appealed to city officials, to students at the school, and to the critics because of its relevance to the community, its “beauty,” its experiential quality and its harmonious relationship to the school architecture. This early PAPS project set the bar high for subsequent commissions. However, it is telling that the praise for *Mnemonics* addresses only the *design* of the project. None of the above quotes reveal much about how *Mnemonics* actually functioned in the Stuyvesant community and whether or not it has lived up to its great potential as a participatory, time-based, public art installation.

POSTSCRIPT:

Judging by the relatively smooth approval process for Jones and Ginzel’s project as well as the overall positive reception that the installed artwork received, it is safe to say that the development and execution of the *Mnemonics* project was a success. This is made even more remarkable considering that Stuyvesant project involved additional oversight and scrutiny on top of the already highly bureaucratic and time-consuming process of commissioning a work of public art. (The fact that Stuyvesant was to be built in Manhattan’s Battery Park City district required the involvement and oversight of The

¹³⁸ Kate O'Dowd and Abby Schaffer, "Top Five Relic Boxes That Slipped Your Eye." *Stuyvesant Spectator*, 24 May 2006.

Battery Park Authority.) It is also important to note that Stuyvesant's status as a premier academic institution and the fact that it was to be the first public high school to receive an official Percent for Art commission, meant there was more attention than normal paid to Jones and Ginzel's art commission at every stage. Referencing one of Jones and Ginzel's strategies for successfully appealing to so many constituencies, Eleanor Heartney described *Mnemonics* as "exemplary in the way it gives the community a central role in the creation of the artwork. By bringing together so many people into the project, Jones and Ginzel gave away a certain amount of authorship to the project."¹³⁹ Indeed it was a great achievement to include the community not only in the planning stages and approval process, but also in the creation of the final artwork. However, Heartney's statement also points out a common problem facing public art projects: the concept of ownership, the management, upkeep and restoration of a public artwork. In "giving up a certain amount of authorship," Jones and Ginzel entrusted a significant amount of the work necessary to complete *Mnemonics* to the school itself, and this, ultimately became a serious problem which plagues the project to this day.

Although Jones and Ginzel's formal proposal for *Mnemonics* concluded with the line "components are designed to be maintenance free" (the understanding with regard to the durability of PAPS artworks is that they should last for at least 100 years) this, unfortunately, did not turn out to be the reality of the situation.¹⁴⁰ Looking beyond the numerous occasions where *Mnemonics* received praise—selection panels, unveiling, press statement, and art reviews—it is apparent that there was a serious lack of

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzel, "Stuyvesant High School Project Description" (1992).

preparedness regarding the conservation work and institutional support necessary to keep this public artwork in good physical shape and uphold its participatory nature. Since 2002 *Mnemonics* has been plagued by a variety of repair needs—including complete re-fabrication of numerous glass blocks. The repercussions of the damages have required the artists to spend a significant amount of time visiting the school and making repairs to the blocks. PAPS has had to dedicate more manpower and financial resources to overseeing the restoration of *Mnemonics* than most other school projects require. Once the artists and PAPS had spent a significant amount of money and effort making repairs, it became necessary to enlist Stuyvesant students, staff, and alumni to help keep *Mnemonics* in good shape. On the whole, the level of care and oversight that *Mnemonics* has required since its installation is far above the threshold of what PAPS is able to provide and also beyond what the school's administration was prepared to handle. There are several lessons to be learned from *Mnemonics*. First of all, that there are downsides to using certain materials (glass) that can be easily broken. Secondly, that having artwork spread out throughout the school makes it difficult to survey and manage the overall artwork and makes each individual component more vulnerable to potential damages. Thirdly, *Mnemonics* teaches us that while it is admirable to invite the school community to participate in the on-going creation of a public artwork, it takes much more than just an interactive premise to ensure that students and staff will actually get involved with public art.

In December 2002 it was brought to the attention of the PAPS office that two of the glass blocks had been damaged and would need to be repaired. Stuyvesant had been used as a triage center in the days immediately following the attack on the World Trade

Center in 2001 and as a result there had been some damage to the school's facility. Upon receiving this news, Michele Cohen (PAPS Program Director) contacted the artists for their recommendation on how to best approach the restoration. Jones and Ginzel responded that it would make sense for them do the work themselves because, "we are the ones who developed the system for filling and installing the blocks in the first place."¹⁴¹ Included in their response to Cohen was an itemized estimate for the cost of labor and supplies to make the repair to both blocks, for a total of \$2,604. In 2003, Jones and Ginzel visited the site to survey the damage to *Mnemonics* and discovered that the situation was far worse that they thought. On October 8, 2003, Ginzel wrote an email to Cohen describing the damages. Seven blocks had been completely destroyed (glass cubes smashed and contents removed). According to school officials the damage was caused by a single act of vandalism perpetrated by a Stuyvesant student. Ginzel lobbied that something must be done to fix these serious damages and asked Cohen whether there would be insurance to cover the unanticipated additional expenses. Cohen brought the matter to the attention of DOE Chancellor Joel Klein. On April 2, 2003, Klein issued a memo requesting approval for a purchase order to \$9,600 to pay for "repair of elements of artwork at Stuyvesant High School."¹⁴² Klein's memo proposed hiring Jones and Ginzel to do the repair work themselves so as to "assure that the artists' intentions are preserved and that the artwork is returned to its original appearance. This is consistent with current standards and practice in art conservation."¹⁴³ Though a lengthy and costly process this resolution—wherein the artist was able to repair his own work according to

¹⁴¹ Letter from Jones and Ginzel to Michele Cohen (9 December 2002)

¹⁴² "Memorandum to office Chancellor to James Loneran," The New York City Department of Education (2 April 2003).

¹⁴³ Ibid.

his own specifications and receive full compensation from the city—represents a successful way of handling of an unfortunate unforeseen situation.

A year later however, when yet further damages to *Mnemonics* were discovered this course of action was no longer an option. PAPS has a very small staff (between two and three full-time employees) who are charged with overseeing the entire art collection of the New York City public schools (over 1500 artworks in total) and any project that requires extra time and additional money beyond the initial art allocation weighs heavily PAPS' limited resources. When the additional damages were reported in 2004 PAPS did not have a budget to underwrite the repairs. On April 17, 2004 Cohen wrote to Stuyvesant's principal, Stanley Teitel, in hopes of finding an alternative solution to pay for restoration. In her letter Cohen described the damages and intimated that the school should to take measures to protect the artwork in the future:

Ten additional blocks are either broken, cracked, or the covers have disappeared. We are concerned by what appears to be student vandalism. We would like to discuss this situation with you and steps to be taken to make the work safer.¹⁴⁴

Cohen offered that the artists are “still available and eager to fix this significant artwork,” but made it clear that PAPS did not have the ability to pay for these repairs.¹⁴⁵

In August of 2004, PAPS staff visited Stuyvesant to inspect *Mnemonics* and found there to be twelve glass blocks with “serious damage.”¹⁴⁶ In his report Greg Frux, a PAPS Project Manager who visited the site, described the situation:

¹⁴⁴ Michele Cohen, Letter to Stanley Teitel, Principal of Stuyvesant High School (17 April 2004).

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Greg Frux email to Michele Cohen (2 August 2004).

Many [of the blocks] are duct taped, which was the protocol we agreed on with the custodian for emergency stabilization. Several others had the glass fronts missing. We also noted another five blocks that had some degree of fogging on the interior. Also, year 2003 and 2004 blocks had, as of yet, not been filled with artifacts.¹⁴⁷

A handwritten note by Cohen from this time indicates that by this point “\$11,000 and change [had already been] spend on this already.”¹⁴⁸ The ongoing problems related to the maintenance of *Mnemonics* were proving to be costly. Furthermore, Frux’s mention that the blocks had not been filled by the classes of 2003 and 2004 indicates that the school was not properly overseeing student participation in the *Mnemonics* project, an integral aspect of the artwork (and the very feature which had received so much praise and attention when the project was first installed.)

In addition to suffering from acts of vandalism, general wear and tear, and a lack of community participation, *Mnemonics* was also damaged when Stuyvesant decided to install a commemorative plaque in the school’s lobby which partially covered one of the *Mnemonics* glass blocks. This affront was first noticed in December 2004 when a memorial service for one of the architects who had helped design the Stuyvesant building that was held in the school’s fifth floor cafeteria. Several colleagues from Gruzen Samton LLP who attended this event saw that a metal plaque (the “Stuyvesant Centennial Commemorative Sculpture”) had been placed directly over the *Mnemonics* “signature block,” on which was inscribed Jones and Ginzl’s names, the title of their work and the date it was unveiled. In a letter to principal Teitel dated December 8, 2004 a partner from Gruzen Samton wrote,

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Michele Cohen (c. 2004)

Not only is [the sculpture] aesthetically out of keeping with the design [of the building]...but I also gather the glass title block for Ginzel & Jones' Percent for Art was removed and damaged, which is very disturbing. In our view there is no question that the metal sculpture should be removed and the lobby returned to the original.¹⁴⁹

Joe Lengeling (who had worked very closely with Jones and Ginzel and who was a big proponent of their artwork from the very beginning) also wrote a strongly worded letter to principal Teitel. Lengeling began by stating how important the Stuyvesant High School project was to him and how attached he had become to the school since its opening. He went on to describe the unique experience of being an architect and having occasion to visit “projects long after they have opened and taken on the culture and personalities of our clients.”¹⁵⁰ He admitted that he usually experiences great joy in seeing the buildings he has designed come alive with people and serve their intended use, but that when he visited Stuyvesant (for the memorial service) he was “taken aback by what [he] found in the main public lobby.”¹⁵¹

I was further disturbed when I realized at least one of the glass blocks that are part of the endearing Jones/Ginzel art installation is now covered. In fact, I believe it was the one that gave them credit for the piece and essentially served as their creative signature. I implore you to curtail this [commemorative sculpture] project and consider another, more discreet method to fulfill the task.¹⁵²

Lengeling's recognition of this “institutional vandalism” reinforces the close and compatible relationship between the artists and architects involved in the Stuyvesant

¹⁴⁹ Letter from Peter Samton to Stanley Teitel (8 December 2004)

¹⁵⁰ Letter from Joseph Lengeling to Stanley Teitel (17 December 2004)

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid.

project. In addition, the fact that this happened is shows one way in which art can be unintentionally mistreated once it has been entrusted into the care o the school.

The fact that the offending “commemorative sculpture” was discovered by chance, is testament to how difficult it is to keep track of artworks in schools. Unfortunately, problems of this nature occur fairly. In many cases, after a significant period of time has passed, the school community tends to forget about an artwork. For example, if a new principal is not made aware of the school’s artwork, it can suffer damage or neglect as a result. As staff and teachers move on from the school and the new generations take over, the connection to the artwork is often lost. According to PAPS program manager, Grace Ramirez-Gaston, it is not uncommon to visit schools and find flyers or student art projects tacked on top of PAPS artworks. Ramirez-Gaston believes it is essential to constantly—during and between site visits—remind principals about the artworks in their schools and to maintain close relationships school staff (administration, teachers, custodians). Ramirez-Gaston likes to meet with the custodian of a school each time she makes a site visit in order to educate (or re-educate) him/her about the PAPS artwork on his/her property and try to empower him/her feel as though they are the “guardian of the artwork.” The hope being that this custodian will at the very least be aware that there is art in the school and therefore be more likely to look for damages and make a call when s/he does see something wrong.

PAPS is fortunate in that it has a budget to do repairs and restorations on their projects (this is not generally the case for other public programs including New York City’s non-school related Percent for Art commissions), but these funds are not unlimited and cannot be relied upon to fund repairs as serious and recurring as the ones required at

Stuyvesant. When placing artwork in a public environment, such as a school a certain amount of wear-and-tear is to be expected. However, it is also the responsibility of the artists and PAPS to think about materials and the nature of projects proposed for school setting in terms of the potential for damage. There is not an unlimited supply of money to pay for repairs, and the restoration budget must serve the entire PAPS collection, not just a few delicate or extraordinarily vulnerable artworks time and time again. In a case like *Mnemonics*, where the artwork required repeat maintenance—refabrication even—PAPS reached a breaking point at which it became impossible to continue to dedicate so much money and manpower to just one project. Though the conservation-related problems were unexpected, perhaps they could have been avoided had the artist selected different materials or found an alternative site for installation. An important factor in determining the overall success of a public artwork is that the need for repair and regular maintenance be minimal. Had the *Mnemonics* blocks been fabricated out of plastic or had they been grouped together in a more prominent (i.e. more easily monitored) location in the school, for example, perhaps they would have been less susceptible to damages. Perhaps these two suggestions would compromise the aesthetic intent of the artists, but it is necessary to take practical steps related to safety and maintenance when planning public art installations.

In addition to the continuous need for repair, another unanticipated problem that *Mnemonics* confronted in the years after its installation had to do with its participatory nature. While still in the process of developing ideas for the Stuyvesant commission, Jones and Ginzel had recognized that the audience would be ever-changing and constantly in flux. They were sensitive to the fact that current students would live with

the artwork for several years, but that every year a new class of students would enter the school and encounter the artwork with fresh eyes. Taking this into account, Jones and Ginzel developed a proposal rooted in the past, but also intended to actively engage present and future generations of Stuyvesant students. However, the fact that *Mnemonics* relies on continued participation by students, faculty, and school administrators ultimately became problematic.

Beginning in 1999, less than a decade after the artwork was installed, the tradition of each graduating class filling a reliquary with materials was no longer happening.¹⁵³ Sadly the very aspect of *Mnemonics* that had received such acclaim and part of what makes this project such an interesting public art project—its active and direct relationship with the school community through the year 2080 (the latest date inscribed on the empty cubes)—eventually became a burden. After the artists and PAPS were out of the picture and the school was left to monitor the artwork on their own, things started to fall apart. It turns out that Stuyvesant did not have a system in place through which to keep reintroducing *Mnemonics* to incoming students and as a result the ritual of each graduating filling a new reliquary inevitably stalled. Considering the premise of *Mnemonics* in retrospect, Tom Finkelppearl admits that though its participatory nature is a wonderful concept, “demanding eighty-eight years of participation is an optimistic gesture in the context of the New York City Department of Education.”¹⁵⁴ Jones, when asked whether there was anything she would have done differently knowing what she know how about how hard it would be to get the graduating classes to participate in

¹⁵³ Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzel email to Michelle Cohen (12 November 2007)

¹⁵⁴ Finkelppearl, 355.

Mnemonics lamented the fact that Stuyvesant has not been able to come up with an effective way to manage and take ownership of the artwork:

I wish that there were a way for the school to really take responsibility [for *Mnemonics*]. I wish there were a mechanism in place, for example, perhaps an art teacher who could take it on as a project. We've tried many ways to find a "cube coordinator." We've met with and tried to involve parent liaisons. I believe it's possible [to make it work], but we are sort of making it up as we go along and it is difficult. [Caring for and keeping up *Mnemonics*] is supposedly included in the school bylines, but I am not sure that they've even elected a "cube coordinator" this year or that they're planning a "block party."

Unlike many artists who might simply walk away from a project and never look back, Jones and Ginzel have dedicated an extraordinary amount of time to help *Mnemonics* live up to its full potential. In 2008 they reached out to the current Stuyvesant High School community—the vast majority of which was now sixteen years removed from the unveiling of *Mnemonics*—to help them understand the nature of the project and encourage their active participation. The artists came up with the idea that each class should have a "cube coordinator" (a student who would take responsibility for getting his or her fellow classmates to contribute items to be enshrined in the glass block dedicated to their graduating class.) Jones and Ginzel also initiated the formation of a "cube committee," which would be a student organization (under the auspices of the student government) whose mission was to reach out to alumni from graduated classes who had failed to fill their cubes. Thanks to these renewed efforts, between November and December of 2007, Stuyvesant was able to fill the cubes reserved for the classes of

2001, 2002, and 2007.¹⁵⁵ In the spring of 2008 Jones and Ginzel made a presentation in front of Stuyvesant’s faculty about *Mnemonics* and introduced a new component of the project, the “Stuy Cubed” website. According to the artists, the website (www.stuy.edu/stuycube.com) was intended to “make the information about *Mnemonics* more accessible to the public, through images and factual information and to inspire ongoing participation in the project through instructions and questions.”¹⁵⁶ Also as part of this presentation, Jones and Ginzel announced that they had been working with students at the school to create an instructional video about the technical aspects of filling a cube and as well as documentary about the *Mnemonics* project.

The “Stuy Cubed” website is a thoughtful and inventive attempt to reach the new generation of Stuyvesant students and capture their interest in the *Mnemonics* project. Looking at the content of the site provides some evidence of its own success. For example, the website features the following quote from an anonymous Stuyvesant English teacher’s explaining what she like about *Mnemonics*:

The building is the only thing all the students have in common in terms of physical environment, because they all come from different places. Having public art in the building helps create a shared sense of community.¹⁵⁷

Despite being a clever and potentially valuable initiative towards making *Mnemonics* relevant and more widely understood, sadly “Stuy Cubed” has suffered from a similar lack of general enthusiasm and sense of propriety that has plagued the artwork itself.

¹⁵⁵ Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzel, *Mnemonics* Presentation: Stuyvesant Faculty Meeting (19 May 2008).

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzel, “Quotes/Articles” *Stuy Cubed, a site about Mnemonics* <http://www.stuy.edu/stuycube/quotes.html#Stuyvesant%20Faculty> (accessed 22 October 2009).

Though extremely positive and touching, the above quote is not representative of the relationship (or lack there of) that most students and teachers have with *Mnemonics*. During a visit to Stuyvesant in February 2010 Jones took time to speak with numerous teachers and asked them each what they thought about *Mnemonics*. Many of them were not aware of the artwork at all, and those who were did not necessarily realize that it was intended to be an on-going, interactive project. Although the teachers were generally excited and interested in the project once they learned more about it, not one stepped in to become involved in the process even when Jones personally solicited their help. The student reaction to questions about the artwork lining the halls and stairwells of their school was not much more encouraging. When Jones asked a group of students what year they would be graduating, they cheerfully responded “2012.” When she followed up by asking if they knew where their class cube was, however, they stared back blankly.

CONCLUSION:

It is important to keep in mind that for several key reasons Stuyvesant is not a typical New York City public high school. Certain peculiarities of the institution itself combined with unique circumstances surrounding this Percent for Art commission affected the way in which the artwork was conceived of and executed, as well as how it has been appreciated and cared for. Stuyvesant’s reputation as being one of the best schools in the nation makes it a high profile school compared with an average neighborhood public school, which would be unknown outside of its district, let alone outside of New York. Adding to its high profile, when the construction project came about, Stuyvesant was to be the first new high school to be built in New York City since 1978. The fact that the

school was to be part of Battery Park City also put the construction project—and by extension the artwork—in the spotlight. For all of these reasons, Stuyvesant was a politically important site for PAPS to “get right.” Furthermore, Stuyvesant’s great roster of famous and/or professionally successful alumni made it possible for Jones and Ginzel to turn to the Parents’ and Alumni Associations for assistance (financial and otherwise). A project similarly ambitious and unconventional in nature might not have been considered possible for another school; even if it had been approved for a less prestigious high school with less well-connected parents and alumni, the final artwork might have fared much worse with regard to maintenance. The fact that even with so much going for it (tremendous vested interest and unmatched human and financial resources) *Mnemonics* has yet to live up to its full potential, points to the fact that this is not perhaps the “brilliantly successful project” it is often credited as being.¹⁵⁸

Not only is Stuyvesant an atypical public school, but Jones and Ginzel also do not represent typical PAPS artists. The fact that they were willing to put in hours upon hours of additional work, not to mention a significant amount of their own money, for the sake of making their project as effective as possible sets them apart. They went above and beyond what is required, and what can be expected, from artists who sign on to do a public art commission. A letter to Michele Cohen (PAPS) from Jones and Ginzel states that the artists ultimately spent \$3,500 of their own money to have their assistant develop the “Stuy Cubed” website and work on other ways in which to engage the Alumni Association and various teachers and classes with *Mnemonics*.¹⁵⁹ In addition to taking on significant financial burdens themselves, Jones and Ginzel got the Alumni Association to

¹⁵⁸ Heiferman, ed., 12.

¹⁵⁹ Andrew Ginzel and Kristen Jones letter to Michele Cohen (c. 2004)

donate \$2,000 towards this project.¹⁶⁰ These acts of dedication and generosity are remarkable, but they are not viable solutions when it comes to maintaining and paying for PAPS projects. Furthermore these efforts simply did not work. It is unrealistic and unfair to depend on artists and alumni to pay for city-sponsored public art initiatives.

Much of the praise that Jones and Ginzel received for *Mnemonics* was for their concept of an artwork that depended on the physical and ideological support of the school community (past, present, and future), suggesting an interesting model for how public art can engage the students and faculty of a school over the course of several decades. *Mnemonics*'s participatory nature is an example of what Suzanne Lacy termed new genre public art. The community engagement driving new genre public art has received a great deal of praise as a way to "connect everyday experience, social critique and creative expression."¹⁶¹ *Mnemonics* seemed poised to do just this based on Jones and Ginzel's proposal.

In reality, however, *Mnemonics* did not live up to its good intentions and reveals hurdles which PAPS and other public art programs still face in terms of reintegrating art with common life. In his essay about New York City's Percent for Art program, Adam Gopnik ponders, "How do the students at Stuyvesant High see this work? For that matter, how often do they see it?"¹⁶² These, of course, are the key questions in terms of evaluating the "success" of any public art project. Gopnik comments further on this point pondering, "To ask these questions is to move deep into the areas of reception—of the

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Susan Cahan and Zoya Kocur, *Contemporary Art and Multicultural Education* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996): xxii.

¹⁶² Adam Gopnik "Introduction: Art in the City" in Heiferman, ed., 13.

“ownership” of art, in the broadest sense—that are tricky to comprehend...”¹⁶³ It is true that it is inherently difficult to gauge the effect any artwork has on the public, but unlike the majority of PAPS projects, *Mnemonics* actually has a built-in mechanism by which it is possible to measure, at least to a certain extent, whether or not the school community is involved with the artwork. If the cubes are filled each year by the graduating class, that is proof that at least a small sector of the public is engaged with the artwork and helping to keep it relevant and functional.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

Case Study #2: *Tributaries*, 1995

Long Island City High School, Queens
Dennis Adams, Artist

INTRODUCTION:

In 1990, negotiations between New York City's Department of Education and the architecture firm Gruzen Samton and Steinglass regarding a new public high school in West Astoria, Queens were well underway. The new facility was to accommodate 2,500 students (grades 9-12) and was intended to relieve several overcrowded local schools.¹⁶⁴ The site for the new school was planned as part of a mixed-use development, including middle-income residential condos, parking facilities, and recreational and community space.¹⁶⁵ Working with the SCA, Gruzen Samton Steinglass (which, at the time, was simultaneously working on the new building for Stuyvesant high school in Battery Park City) designed a six-story brick and stainless steel building near the East River waterfront. Discussions about where to place a Percent for Art commission in the new school began after the architectural design plans had been finalized, but before construction bids went out. On November 29, 1990, the architects provided PAPS with a list of the areas they identified as being the best potential locations for artwork. The list specified several interior and exterior locations including the main entrance lobby, the library, the auditorium, the cafeteria, several stairwells, the ground floor escalator, the swimming pool, the school's day care center, portions of the outdoor fencing and

¹⁶⁴ "West Queens High School: Artwork sites and concepts" New York City Department of Cultural Affairs (c. 1990).

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

grillwork, and the finials near the school's roof on the northern façade.¹⁶⁶ Long Island City High School was completed in 1995 and boasts a dance studio, a swimming pool, a weight room, two gymnasiums, a full-service health clinic, and an auditorium with a state-of-the-art sound system.¹⁶⁷ The school's top-floor cafeteria features large windows with a view of the Upper Manhattan skyline. The school is home to three original PAPS artworks. The \$360,000 total Percent for Art budget for this new school construction was split evenly between Dennis Adams, Mel Chin, and Maura Sheehan.¹⁶⁸

The decision to commission Dennis Adams represents a comparatively bold choice by the PAPS selection committee—one that raises several important issues about the function of public art (as well as the role of the public artist) in public schools. At the time he was awarded the Long Island City High School commission, Adams was best known for his politically oriented public interventions. Although Adams generally eschews labeling his artwork and practice, the majority of his work leading up to *Tributaries* was based on provocative juxtapositions of imagery and text. His preference to “work within the messy vitality of public settings in order to raise questions about information and thought,” does not comply with the standard philosophy of Percent for

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Mel Chin's commission for Long Island City High School, *Landmind* (1995), consists of glass panels incorporated into the main staircase at the school, which is accessed through the lobby. Chin etched the altitudes of famous mountain ranges into the glass panels along with images of cultural symbols related to the geographic area of each mountain range. Chin also designed small sculptures of the various mountains to set atop the railing of the staircase and created a chart, which is set at the foot of the stairs, that explains the altitudes and provides a world map to pinpoint the locations of the mountain ranges. (<http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcla/html/panyc/chin.shtml> - accessed 28 April 2010).

Maura Sheehan's commission for Long Island City High School, *Frieze Frame* (1995), is comprised of ceramic tiles that run for 500 feet along the top of the school's lobby walls. The tiles depict a series of pixilated images of people running and is meant to resemble an unwinding spool of film. (Heiferman, ed., 215.)

Art, which promotes art that “stylistically and thematically...appeals to abroad audience of children and adults.”¹⁶⁹ Furthermore, although Adams had prior experience creating work within the public realm, a non-art audience, let alone an uninformed public audience, does not easily understand his typical subject matter and style.

Because politically charged artwork has a greater potential to incite controversy, public art programs generally shy away from it and gravitate towards “a predictable spectrum of safe esthetic possibilities ranging from bland formal exercises in abstraction to expressive and narrative pictorial forms.”¹⁷⁰ Out of all the construction projects eligible for Percent for Art, schools are the least likely candidates for political art because there is an expectation not only that the artwork should be broadly appealing, but also that it somehow “reaffirms the values of education.”¹⁷¹ Despite the notion that exposure to unconventional and provocative visual material might actually stimulate students intellectually in a way that being bombarded with textbook material (sometimes without explanation or an option for discussion) cannot, as a rule, PAPS artworks are intentionally benign. Dr. J. Ulbricht, who has written extensively about the role of art in education, suggests that one reason why there is little political art in schools is because more often than not “administrators, parents, and teachers see art as more about craft and decoration and less about important political, environmental and social concerns.”¹⁷² If, however, as Mayor Bloomberg proposes, “our public schools have a vital role to play in

¹⁶⁹ Patricia C. Phillips “Critical Constructions” *Building Against Image: Dennis Adams 1979-1987* (New York, NY: The Alternative Museum, 1987): 3.

Cohen, 226.

¹⁷⁰ Phillips, 3.

¹⁷¹ Cohen, 10.

¹⁷² J. Ulbricht “Learning about Political Art in the Classroom and Community” *Art Education* Vol. 56,. No. 3. (May 2003): 7.

keeping New York the cultural capital of the world,” than it behooves PAPS administrators to work to expand the definition of art for the parties Ulbricht calls out.¹⁷³ Broadening the kind of art that is deemed “acceptable” for public schools will not only lead to innovation and variety in the types of public art projects, but **may** also help acclimate uninitiated communities—“the next generation of artists and audiences: our public schools students”—better understand the role of art in contemporary society as being far more than craft and decoration.¹⁷⁴

Unlike many PAPS artists, prior to being hired to produce an artwork for a public school, Adams already had significant experience creating public art elsewhere in New York City. In 1985 Adams participated for Creative Time’s “Art on the Beach,” contributing *A Podium for Dissent* (1985).¹⁷⁵ This piece consisted of a photographic blow-up of Ronald Reagan which had been sliced and shifted apart just above the mouth area wherein catwalk and podium were installed, thus allowing a speaker/“dissenter” to walk in between the two halves of Regan’s face. This type of aggressive imagery and overtly political context is characteristic of Adams’s public works. Another example, *Bus Shelter II* (1986), displayed a larger-than-life photograph of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg (who are not identified textually) on the side of a custom-designed bus shelter located on 14th Street and 3rd Avenue in Manhattan. Adams’s intention with these public artworks was to engage the community on their own turf by inserting scintillating intellectually provocative subject matter into the pedestrian environment. Other iconic (and controversial) political figures in Adams’s repertoire leading up to the Long Island

¹⁷³ Cohen, 7.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Phillips, 3.

City High School commission include: Patty Hearst, Joseph McCarthy and Roy Cohn. It is important to note that although Adams was uniquely prepared to an extent for certain challenges related to public art installations, his pre-*Tributaries* practice involved temporary pieces that relied heavily on intuitive references made by the audience. Assuming that Adams's intentionally provocative imagery and its relationship to the text was understood at the moment works such as *A Podium for Dissent* were installed, the references would not necessarily stand the test of time without public programming or at the very least explanatory signage, which has never been part of Adams's public practice.

Adams "does not think of himself as a public artist," at least not in terms of how the PAPS administrators generally understand that role.¹⁷⁶ According to Patricia C. Phillips, Adams "rejects the idea of [the public's] 'projected needs' and is willing to accept the unknown future of the work."¹⁷⁷ Instead of aiming to satisfy (or placate, as he understands it) a specified public, Adams envisions his work as a means of tapping into the "historical conception of 'public' ... a tradition of productive debate and dissent."¹⁷⁸ The "tradition" he refers to is that of an open forum wherein people are challenged to actively participate in democracy by questioning and evaluating art as opposed to blindly accepting (or ignoring) its presence. PAPS, on the other hand, instead of recognizing that public artwork itself can be a site for debate, focuses attention on the democratic process during the artist selection and project approval processes. In this way PAPS aims to create a final artwork that will ultimately please the community because it was made based on their input. The Percent for Art legislation (which applies to all PAPS

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

commissions) rationalizes the impetus for permanent projects based on “the aesthetic impact they have on the surrounding community, [they]...are designed to enhance the neighborhood in which they are located, [and]...bring pride to our citizens.”¹⁷⁹ By troubleshooting potential problems using a small focus group, PAPS assumes the final artwork can automatically bring “pride to our citizens.” This philosophy is at odds with Adams’s vision that the public artist should create a catalyst that empowers the public by encouraging them to react to art. Whereas PAPS maintains that democracy in the form of art-by-committee is the best way to serve the public’s needs through public art, Adams prefers to have his final work be part of an open forum.

Another point of contention was Adams’s clear preference for temporary public projects (which he feels better accommodate a more experimental practice.) In an interview published in the *Journal of Contemporary Art* Adams explained that, due to the nature of the subjects his work touches on, he has been most successful in creating, “small-scale temporary public projects where I am working with one or two engaged sponsors who have strong knowledge of the sociopolitical dynamics of the place. This allows the work to have a more radical program and actually get realized.”¹⁸⁰ For example, the “Bus Shelter” series was a project Adams conceived of on his own and then brought to the Public Art Fund in search of financial assistance. By proposing a fully conceptualized temporary project to a public art organization that has private funds, Adams was able to avoid the oversight and restrictions that are inherent to a permanent tax-dollar public art commission. When asked in 1987 whether he would ever consider

¹⁷⁹ “Notice of Adoption of Regulations for the Implementation of Chapter 9, Section 234 of the Charter – Percent for Art Law” Office of the Mayor of New York City (c. 1982)

¹⁸⁰ Peter Doroshenko “Interview with Dennis Adams” *Journal of Contemporary Art* <http://www.jca-online.com/adams.html> (accessed 1 April 2010)

doing a work on the scale of a building, Adams replied: “No, I see myself as an interventionist, so the prospect of large-scale architectural production seems too institutionalized. That’s also why I resist any notion of public art that approaches urban design.”¹⁸¹ Based on Adams’s preference for small scale privately-funded public interventions, it is interesting that he signed on to do a permanent commission city agency, which would undoubtedly require that he compromise on several of his defining artistic principals. Adams’s preference for temporary, rabble-rousing public art interventions set the stage for an interesting and controversy-prone origin for a PAPS commission.

BEGINNING STAGES: ARTIST SELECTION & PROJECT APPROVALS:

The first artist selection panel for Long Island City High School was held on November 29, 1990 at the DCA offices and was chaired by Tom Finkelppearl, Director of Percent for Art. The panelists included Linda Blumberg (DCA), Michele Cohen (PAPS), Maureen Grinnan (SCA), Louis Grachos (Queens Museum), Renee Green (artist), Marge Goldwater (Nogchi Museum) and Constance Bernardi (Queens High School Superintendent’s office.) In addition, the following people were present as non-voting advisors, Bill Prettitore (SCA), Barbara Helm (SCA), Eliot Nolen (Art Commission), and Aida Gonzales (Queen’s Borough President’s Office.) At this meeting, the architects (representatives from Gruzen Samton Steinglass) outlined which areas they would like to be considered as possible sites for artwork and then the panel reviewed slides of work by approximately fifty artists. The artists under consideration for this commission included

¹⁸¹ Howard Halle, “Interview with Dennis Adams,” *Building Against Image: Dennis Adams 1979-1987* (New York, NY: The Alternative Museum, 1987), 13.

several notable “political” artists. In addition to Adams, the panel looked at work by Jenny Holzer, Cady Noland, Jeff Wall, and Tim Rollins. The fact that the panel was asked to consider these artists for the Long Island City High School commission indicates that Percent For Art (whose officers are responsible for curating the slide presentations based on the Percent for Art registry) was willing to expand beyond the type of artist usually commissioned for this type of work. When asked to reflect back on this panel and whether there seemed to be any particular intention to encourage the selection of a politically inclined artist for the commission, Michele Cohen (PAPS) said the following:

Tom Finkelparl...the director of Percent for Art at that time ...was quite adventurous. And at that time the commissioner of Cultural Affairs was Schuyler Chapin and he pretty much let Tom do whatever he wanted. [In this case] there was an advantage of not having rigid oversight [in the commissioning process].¹⁸²

The second artist selection panel was held at the Noguchi Museum in Queens on December 17, 1990. In addition to the panelists, Lucille Hartmann of Queens Community Board #1 was present as a non-voting advisor. During the meeting Hartmann made a point of voicing the community’s concern that the artist(s) selected examine historical aspects of the Long Island City neighborhood and somehow incorporate this context into the final artwork. Ms. Hartmann also noted that the student body of the new high school would be multicultural, with a large percentage of Greeks and a growing Asian and Hispanic population. The panel then looked at slides of work by thirty-six artists (which had been narrowed down from the selection of 54 presented at the first selection panel.) Two back-to-back votes further whittled down the list to the following nine artists: Dennis Adams, Mel Chin, Mark Dion, Susan Kaprov, Alexis Smith, Maura Sheehan,

¹⁸² Michele Cohen interview with the author (15 January 2010).

Sokhi Wagner, Ik-Joong Kang, and Vernon Fisher. Finkelppearl (DCA) explained that because of the relatively large budget available for this art commission, the panel should consider selecting two or three artists to create separate artworks for the school. In preparation for the final artist selection panel, Percent for Art agreed to contact the finalists and invite them to be interviewed by the panelists.

In addition to the architectural plans for the school and the list of potential sites for art, the nine finalists were also sent an article that outlined the history of Long Island City. The article, published in *Metropolis* magazine in October 1990, was intended to provide a general overview of the Long Island City neighborhood, a sense of the current local community, and information about the area's recent real estate development boom. Hartmann's presence at the panel (even as a non-voting community representative) and the fact that the artists in contention for the Long Island City High School commission were provided with contextual materials about the school's neighborhood and history, indicate that from the very beginning stages of this commission, the level of community involvement was quite high.

The third (and final) artist selection panel was held on February 4, 1991 at the DCA office. Of the nine artists approached, two (Vernon Fisher and Alexis Smith) had declined to participate, leaving only seven artists to present their work in front of the panel. Before bringing in each artist, Finkelppearl reviewed with the panelists what they should expect from the artist presentations. He stressed that the interview process was an opportunity for artists to discuss their work in general and that while some artists would be very focused, others would present their work in a broader scope. Finkelppearl reminded the panelists that the artists would not be expected to have developed specific

ideas for Long Island City High School until they had been awarded a commission.

Finkelpearl reminded the panel that their role was to select an artist (or group of artists) based on their past work and not a site-specific proposal for this particular school.

The minutes from this meeting describe Adams's presentation as a short slide show of past works and brief discussion about his general art practice. In introducing his artwork to the panel, Adams mentioned that he typically "plays with the vernacular of a place, incorporating familiar architectural structures with unexpected images."¹⁸³ Adams showed images of several projects, which highlighted his thought-provoking juxtapositions of imagery and text. Adams spoke about his "Bus Shelter" series as well as a public project he had done in Geneva, Switzerland (*Reworking*, 1988) wherein he superimposed headshots of immigrant workers with the name of their hometown onto "Men at Work" signs and placed these in high profile sites throughout the city.¹⁸⁴ The fact that Adams presented the panel with works such as *Bus Shelter II* (1986) (in which the photograph of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg in the back of a police paddy wagon is juxtaposed with the words "RECOVER" and "IMITATION") indicates that he was forthcoming in presenting a potentially conservative panel with his typical practice and politically charged subject matter.

During a question and answer session with the selection panel Adams was straightforward about his artistic philosophy and practice. The Minutes record Adams as having said that in order to come up with a formal proposal, he would need to do an in-depth study of the school's architecture and that he would also look into the history of the

¹⁸³ "Minutes from Artist Selection Panel Meeting: West Queens High School" _New York City Department of Cultural Affairs (4 February 1991).

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

site, saying that any project he would undertake for the Long Island City High School project would “develop out of the site” and involve “extensive research.” At this point, Adams also revealed that he was more comfortable with smaller budgets : “\$60,000 – 100,000.”and that he was “philosophically opposed to permanent work” and “typically prefers temporary works of art.”¹⁸⁵

Despite Adams’s admitted aversion to doing a permanent commission and his preference for smaller-scale projects, the Minutes from discussion following all of the artist presentations indicate that the panel generally found Adams’s work to be “extremely compelling.”¹⁸⁶ One panelist, for instance, expressed great admiration for Adams’s “sophisticated methodology.”¹⁸⁷ Adams’ willingness to take into consideration the history of the Long Island City High School greatly impressed the panel. The Minutes from this meeting state: “Mr. Adams, an experienced public artists, would work within the community.”¹⁸⁸ The panel did, however, voice apprehension that Adams’s themes might be too controversial, a point which was inevitable when considering this particular artist for a school project. According to an article published by *Art Education* in 1995, “For many educators and administrations, the school is often considered to be an unsuitable forum for controversial issues, on the grounds that they will generate conflict.”¹⁸⁹ As mentioned earlier, for this reason, it is not typical of PAPS to invite artists who deal primarily with politics into a school environment. However, even taking into

¹⁸⁵ Michele Cohen, Handwritten notes on Artist Selection Panel Meeting: West Queens High School (4 February 1991).

¹⁸⁶ “Minutes from Artist Selection Panel Meeting: West Queens High School,” New York City Department of Cultural Affairs (4 February 1991).

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ David R. Henley, “Political Correctness in the Artroom: Pushing the Limits of Artistic License” *Art Education*, Vol. 48., No. 5, (September 1995): 65-66.

consideration Adams's past work and seeing that there was a potential that he would create something unconventional for Long Island City High School, the panel ultimately agreed upon Adams as a top choice for the school's art commission. The Minutes indicate that the panel was confident that Adams's proposition to create a work dealing with "alternate histories and ideas would be provocative and educational."¹⁹⁰

PAPS's decision to commission an artist known for his politically charged work in was admirably adventurous, but also a potentially risky undertaking for the commissioning City agencies as well as for the artist. Adams would now face an art-by-committee approval process during which it would be highly likely that aspects of his proposal would be vetoed or, at the very least, subjected to revisions. Adams entered into the PAPS contract well aware of the potential for committees to quell creativity. Admitting that he usually he does not take on projects that are tied to bureaucratic processes, Adams has explained,

I'm invited to many places to do proposals and sometimes these proposals don't go for various reasons, one of which is the nature of the subjects I've touched on...Once you are tied into the bureaucratic networks of a place there is no room for the "outspoken."¹⁹¹

If a PAPS project is subjected to many revisions and redesigns, the resulting artwork is typically something that none of the concerned parties are completely happy with in the end. The artist feels compromised, the commissioning agencies feel betrayed and/or defensive, and the community winds up with a confused artistic vision. Grace Ramirez-Gaston, current PAPS project manager, has noted that when an artist is required to re-

¹⁹⁰ "Minutes from Artist Selection Panel Meeting: West Queens High School," New York City Department of Cultural Affairs (4 February 1991).

¹⁹¹ Doroshenko "Interview with Dennis Adams" *Journal of Contemporary Art* <http://www.jca-online.com/adams.html> (accessed 1 April 2010).

present proposals in front of the panel on multiple occasions, often times he or she loses confidence and enthusiasm for the project. Summing up the unfortunate fall-out of many art-by-committee projects, Ada Louise Huxtable (writing in the early 1980s, right around the time New York City adopted the Percent for Art legislation) lamented, “The kind of artwork that will come out of those politically constructed New York committees is predictable – and dreary.”¹⁹² By awarding the Long Island City commission to Dennis Adams, the artist selection panel opened the door for a potential debate about the role of political art in schools, and also created a situation wherein it was highly likely that artistic intentions would be challenged and necessarily reformed by the democratic PAPS approval process.

On February 19, 1991 Charmaine Jefferson, Acting Commissioner of the DCA, officially offered Adams a \$120,000 commission to create an artwork for Long Island City High School. In her letter Jefferson referenced several key points the panel had responded to positively from Adams’s presentation. Jefferson explained to Adams that the panelists had been,

particularly intrigued by your style of integrating unexpected images within existing infrastructures. They felt that this means of offering alternative histories and ideas would provoke the students to explore relative social and cultural issues. The panel would like to see you work closely with the students in developing your project and would encourage you to assist the Department of Education incorporate your work into the curriculum.¹⁹³

This quote reinforces the fact that Adams’s tendency to “provoke” was, in the end, looked upon favorably by the artist selection panel. What is also interesting in this quote

¹⁹² Ada Louise Huxtable “The Editorial Notebook; Percent for Art,” *The New York Times* (10 August 1981).

¹⁹³ Letter from Charmaine Jefferson to Dennis Adams (19 February 1991).

is that the last line suggests that Adams's impending artwork take on a supplementary responsibility—that of a teaching aid. It is not characteristic for a PAPS artwork to officially become a component of a school's curriculum, and in this particular case, the request was likely a safeguard measure. The proposal to incorporate Adam's artwork into the structured environment of classroom learning was perhaps a way to preempt dealing with political subject matter comes with a handbook of sorts, it might be less likely to be seen as controversial.

The notion that a PAPS artwork could become an official teaching tool is exceptional—simultaneously progressive and potentially problematic. On the one hand, inviting the artist to contribute ideas about how his artwork should be taught represents a significant elevation in the responsibility and prominence given to art in a school. Incorporating an artwork into the curriculum requires that the artist's vision be incorporated into the overall pedagogical mission of the school, thus ensuring said art would not be taken for granted or ignored by teachers and students (as, sadly, is often the fate of PAPS projects.) However, introducing a contemporary public artwork into a school's core curriculum is easier said than done. Public school curriculums are based on strict government standards and are difficult to modify. It would involve much less red tape if teachers were encouraged to come up with creative tangential ways to incorporate art into their various lessons, than trying to modify a government-approved curriculum around a specific artwork. (However, if the artwork is not officially part of the school curriculum, there is no guarantee that it will ever be referenced in classroom discussions.) This said, there is an argument to be made in favor of artwork in a school being intentionally separate from the classroom experience. According to the UNESCO

International Bureau of Education, “the arts may be seen not as means, but ends in itself ...as ‘offering experiences that are uniquely human and inherently worthwhile.’”¹⁹⁴ These potential benefits, however, assume that the art in question is not being introduced to students as a visual teaching aid for one or multiple core curricular subjects. This argument—that art exist as a realm that is supplementary to what goes on inside the classroom—is at odds with what Adams was asked to do in terms of finding a way to incorporate his artwork into the school’s curriculum. In this respect, circumstances surrounding this particular PAPS commission raises fundamental questions as to what the role of public art at Long Island City High School—and by extension public schools in general—should, or could, ultimately be.

When asked to reflect back on his initial reaction upon being offered the Long Island City High School commission, Adams remembers feeling “hesitant to take on a project in a high school.”¹⁹⁵ First off, he admitted that the prospect conjured negative associations with his own high school experience.¹⁹⁶ Adams also explained that he had routinely resisted working within “institutions with a specific audience.”¹⁹⁷ Ultimately, however, Adams accepted the PAPS commission with the hope of in some small way improving students’ high school experience, which for him had for him been “a very restrictive and unproductive situation.”¹⁹⁸ Adams saw his role as providing something new, inspiring and, most importantly, outside the cliché high school experience. He

¹⁹⁴ Massimo Amadio, Nhung Truong and Jana Tscherenev “Instructional Time and the Place of Aesthetic Education in School Curricula at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century,” *IBE Working Papers on Curriculum Issues N°1* (Geneva, Switzerland, UNESCO International Bureau of Education, March 2006): 4.

¹⁹⁵ Heiferman, ed., 168.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

certainly did not see himself providing material to be absorbed into (and regurgitated out of) the type of institution he himself had found to be “restrictive” and non-stimulating.

INSTALLATION & REACTIONS:

On March 13, 1992 the DCA convened a meeting to discuss the Long Island City High School project at the offices of the architecture firm Gruzen, Samton, and Steinglass to review the fabrication and installation details for Adams’s artwork. Representatives from the SCA, DOE, and Percent for Art were all in attendance. In front of these parties Adams presented a proposal for creating multiple lightboxes on which photographs showing “alternate history” themes would be displayed. The lightboxes would be customized to fit directly above the drinking fountains (the models and locations for which had been predetermined by the architects). Adams addressed the materials for the lightboxes (lexan panels) as well as potential sources of power and safe means by which to run electricity to each lightbox. Explaining his choice of location Adams said he wanted these images to be in a place “where most students will congregate and relate to the material in the photographs.”¹⁹⁹ He also revealed that part of the reason he chose the water fountains is because they were part of the prescribed architecture of the building. This decision by Adams intentionally precluded the collaborative spirit that PAPS aims to foster between artist and architect. Adams explained his rationale for having as little interaction with the architects as possible saying, “The bottom line is that the architects don’t really want to work with the artists because they consider themselves artists. And, of course, 99% of the time they’re not. They long for artistic pedigree. I long not to be to

¹⁹⁹ “Minutes of Meeting Re: West Queens High School,” Gruzen Samton Steinglass: Architects, Planners & Interior Designers (13 March 1992).

be an architect and to be left alone.”²⁰⁰ Elaborating on why he chose the water fountains as the site for his artwork Adams explained,

I never studied the site plans before making my proposal for Long Island City High School. I just asked: *How many drinking fountains will there be and where are they going?* I’d already done a drinking fountain piece in Montreal. I jumped on the idea of the drinking fountain because A) they’re essential in a school and B) they’re at a site of direct communication between students, outside the official program. So in the end, I never had to visit the construction site or wear a hard hat, I never wanted to do any of that.²⁰¹

Although Adams’s initial decision may have been a way to get out of collaborating with the architects, there is also a conceptual reason why he gravitated towards working with the drinking fountains. Adams intended his art to be displayed in a realm where casual social interaction would take precedence over formalized instruction. During Adams’s presentation a question was raised as to whether the location of artwork above the drinking fountains might send a mixed message to students who, as a rule, are discouraged from loitering between classes: Would the art distract the students and cause them to linger longer than necessary in the hallways? This is a valid point for a large high school with heavy traffic in the corridors and limited time between classes. This question directly challenged Adams’s vision of his artwork as providing a sense relief and repose with the needs of the school to keep order in the hallways. In the end, however, Adams’s proposal to create artwork specifically for a “site of transition” where “students might exchange a piece of information, gossip, dissent, or perform other social interactions outside the more restricted areas” prevailed.²⁰²

²⁰⁰ Dennis Adams interview with the author (12 February 2010)

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Heiferman, ed., 168

On September 25, 1992 Louise Nocilazzi, an SCA community relations representative, organized a community meeting for the Long Island City High School project. The Community Liaison Committee was composed of representatives of the DOE, elected officials, and community representatives whose mission was to “keep all parties informed and identify issues that must be resolved” with regard to the Long Island City High School project.²⁰³ In addition to reviewing issues such as the final name of the school (at this point in time it was often referred to as “West Queens High School”) and the school logo, this group of concerned constituents discussed the panned art projects. Regarding Adams’s proposal (the artist himself was not present at this meeting), the committee agreed that they would like to have a role in selecting the final imagery for Adams’s lightboxes. They proposed that Adams present them with twenty-one possible historic black-and-white photographs, from which they would select fourteen “acceptable” images.²⁰⁴ The committee also requested that Adams create a book, which would be kept in the school’s library and that would include detailed annotations on all the images to be used in the final artwork.²⁰⁵ The desired level of involvement on the part of the Community Liaison Committee is a prime example of how democracy can impinge on creativity (or help improve the project, depending on whose perspective is taken into consideration) when it comes to public art commissions. Years later, when I revealed to Adams that the community had wanted to be part of the image selection process, he said

²⁰³ “Minutes of the Community Liaison Committee Meeting No. 1 Re: West Queens High School,” New York City School Construction Authority (25 September 1992)

²⁰⁴ Michele Cohen, Handwritten notes from Community Liaison Committee Meeting No. 1 Re: West Queens High School (25 September 1992).

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

“Why would I do that? I am the artist. I was commissioned to do a piece so I am going to choose the images.”²⁰⁶

In April 1994 a small group including Michele Cohen, Dennis Adams, Liza Lenas (DCA), Anne Ocone (DOE) and Lori Weisenberg-Catalano (SCA) met to review the fabrication details for Adams’s lightboxes. At this meeting Adams provided a more formalized project description including a preliminary budget and sketches. It was determined that in order to keep on schedule, the lightbox fabrication should take place in the upcoming months. This meant that the structures would have to be made in advance of the final approval of the photographs to be used. Although Adams had not yet determined the exact images he planned to use, he did reveal that the twelve images would represent moments from the civil rights movement and that a small amount of text might accompany the imagery. It was agreed that Adams would research and select photographs during the summer of 1994 so that by the fall he would be ready to make a presentation in front of students, faculty and community representatives of Long Island City High School. Regarding the subject matter for the water fountain installations, Adams recalls “It was only after I chose the site that the idea for creating a work about the civil rights movement came to me. I started thinking very obviously about those double drinking fountains for blacks and whites that were central to images for American racism.”²⁰⁷ With his final decision to use the American Civil Rights movement as a visual theme while referencing segregation in his use of the water fountains, a signature Adams combination of stirring imagery and provocative placement was born.

In May 1995 Adams presented PAPS with statement describing *Tributaries*:

²⁰⁶ Dennis Adams interview with the author (12 February 2010)

²⁰⁷ Heiferman, ed., 168.

A work that will take the form of twelve back-illuminated photographic images, each of which will be installed over and contiguous to one of the twelve drinking fountains that are found in the public corridors of the school. Two fountains are located on each of the six floors. The photographs will document seminal moments in the history of the American civil rights movement.

The site of the drinking fountain is a station already inscribed in the architecture and meaning of the school. Beyond its utilitarian function, it provides a break in the semantic order of the institution. On the one hand, it opens up a moment for individual reflection. On the other, it generates unofficial social interaction in the form of jokes, gossip, flirtations and dissent.

The title of the work, *Tributaries*, has two connotations. In one sense, it references a branch of water that flows away from the mainstream. This meaning further suggests a line of dissent, a rupture in the dominant movement of society. In another sense it references a “tribute,” suggesting a site of commemoration.²⁰⁸

This description of *Tributaries* is very much in keeping with Adams’s oeuvre in that the work is intended to spark dialogue and interaction without formally creating a sense of cohesive community identity or imposing a specific ideology. This description is also noteworthy in that it reiterates Adams’s desire to highlight an area of social interaction (dissent, even) within the school. Nowhere in this text does Adams mention anything about creating a resource that could be incorporated into Long Island City High School’s core curriculum. Based on this description, both the future principal of Long Island City High School and Peggy Harrington, High School Superintendent of Queens expressed

²⁰⁸ Dennis Adams’s Proposal for *Tributaries* (8 May 1995)

enthusiasm for *Tributaries*, noting that it had “tremendous educational potential as well as artistic merit.”²⁰⁹

It is interesting to contrast Adams’s explanation of *Tributaries* with a description of the work that was drafted by the DOE around the same time. The disparity between the two is indicative of a larger disconnect between the artist’s intent and the City’s ultimate expectations for *Tributaries*.

The stills will be selected from stock photographs recording contemporary civil rights movements of North America. Students and staff may recognize some of the images while other images may contain familiar subject matter, settings or events. Referencing class work, the photographs will depict actual events, not always discussed in textbooks. The artwork, integrating history into the architecture, reveals history as an interpretation, where meanings change through time, perception, awareness and presentation. The artwork is site-specific. The drinking fountain was selected as a pre-existing architectural unit that creates a visual break within the uniformity of the glazed block corridor.²¹⁰

As opposed to Adams’s version, which has no mention of textbooks, class work, or any formalized student-teacher interaction with his artwork, the DOE’s write-up fundamentally ties *Tributaries* to the school curriculum. In terms of the location for the work, whereas Adams highlights the “dissent” associated with school corridors and moments of free time between classes, the DOE references *Tributaries*’ location only in terms of its aesthetic impact on the continuous glazed blocks of the corridor.

To accompany the written proposal he presented in May 1995, Adams also showed images for all twelve of the lightboxes. With regard to his selection of images

²⁰⁹ “Minutes from Community Meeting: West Queens High School,” Department of Education of the City of New York (8 May 1995).

²¹⁰ “Internal Memo re: Dennis Adams *Tributaries*” Department of Education of the City of New York (c. 1995).

two concerns were raised by the community. There were objections to a photograph of a burning building and to photograph depicting a confrontation of demonstrators. It was requested that Adams replace these two images with less inflammatory photos. Ms. Harrington (High School Superintendent of Queens) also suggested that more images of women be included in the final selection of images. In addition to these critiques specific to two images, the community expressed an overall lack on enthusiasm for Adams's chosen subject matter. Referencing the critical reception to his proposal at this time, Adams recalled feeling surprised that the school voiced opposition to his idea of using photographs from the Civil Rights movement. In an interview with Michele Cohen (PAPS) Adams revealed, "I was shocked to find that there were a couple of teachers who were very resistant. They felt that the civil rights movement was too limited a subject that did not address the diversity of their students."²¹¹ Having arrived at the decision to use imagery from the civil rights movement with the intention of evoking a universal subject—freedom and equality—Adams was surprised that he had to defend this decision to the school community. Adams explained to the school representatives that "Civil rights is not a subject for a specific audience; its messages, in fact, resist ownership of any kind."²¹² Though Adams' intention was not to favor one particular ethnic group with his work, his proposal was judged negatively for not representing the ethnic make-up of the Long Island City high school community. Given how much emphasis was placed on identity politics in terms of art made during the 1990s, it is no surprise that Adams' decision to use images depicting desegregation was confusing and ultimately created a source of contention within the school community.

²¹¹ Cohen, p. 2.

²¹² Heiferman, ed., 168.

The discrepancy between Adams's intention and the community's reaction to the imagery he selected is, in part, due to the fact that there are numerous ways to define a community and just as many, if not more, ways to attempt engage that community through public art. Adams' conception of his work being "public" is rooted in the idea that art can foster a community by providing source material meant to evoke a common sense of curiosity. Expanding on this idea, Patricia C. Phillips has written that, "Adams uses...disorder to invent an idea of public art that supports pluralism, action and free thought. The viewer is encouraged to confront the complexity of the world, as well as the unpredictability of his/her own reactions."²¹³ This description of how art can create a community through personal understanding of one's own opinions and role in society, supports Adams inclination to provide a catalyst for the students of Long Island City High School. Whether or not this is a viable means of involving the community with public art, it is not how PAPS seeks to serve schools. Writing about the PAPS mission, Cohen points out that PAPS works should "reflect the community and the site."²¹⁴ When considering the reaction to *Tributaries* it is important to remember that from the very beginning stages of the Long Island City High School commission process, the community advisor expressed concerned that the artwork reflect the cultural make-up of the student body, which was primarily Asian, Greek and Hispanic. The school was expecting art that would celebrate their particular blend of ethnic diversity and in this way visually unite the wills, wants and ways of their unique school community. Although Adams selected what he considered to be a universally appealing subject matter, his work was criticized for not representing the school community.

²¹³ Phillips, 3.

²¹⁴ Cohen, 157.

Tributaries was installed at Long Island City High School in 1995. The final image selection included twelve stills taken from the award-winning civil rights movement documentary, *Eye on the Prize* (1987).²¹⁵ Because the images were lifted from the video footage and sized up to fit the large scale of the lightboxes they appear slightly grainy and blurry. It takes a moment to make sense of the images, which in some cases are so pixilated and blown-out that they appear almost abstract upon first glance. High contrast black-and-white images such as a young girl holding the hand of a U.S. Marshall as she walks into a recently desegregated school in Little Rock Arkansas and a segregated lunch counter in Birmingham Alabama are back-lit so that the white areas glow quite brightly and stand out against the otherwise drab corridors of the school. Vertical lines of text—references to events and names famous people from the period—are overlaid onto the image in such a way that they are legible from the perspective of whoever is drinking water from the fountain.

POSTSCRIPT:

In May 1996 Michele Cohen wrote to Adams describing a recent visit she had made to Long Island City High School during which she met with the school's library staff. Apparently the librarians were "perplexed" by *Tributaries* and expressed interest in having more information on the project, including factual background on the photographic source material.²¹⁶ In addition, Cohen's letter mentions that a "random sampling of teachers" at the high school were also unaware that *Tributaries* made reference to the civil rights movement but that "when I explained what [*Tributaries*] is

²¹⁵ Ibid., 152

²¹⁶ Letter from Michelle Cohen to Dennis Adams (16 May 1996).

about, they became more receptive.”²¹⁷ To remedy what she finds to be an insufficiently impactful PAPS project, Cohen proposed organizing a teacher training session to benefit all of Long Island City High School with an open discussion. In concluding this letter Cohen asks Adams to let her know “if you have any ideas about how to best elucidate your artwork so the message is not lost.”²¹⁸

At Cohen’s behest, a teacher training session was held on November 5, 1996 to re-familiarize the teachers and staff of Long Island City High School with *Tributaries*. Adams prepared notes on all twelve of the photographs he appropriated as the basis for his work, in order to elucidate the context of each image. For example, one image represents a demonstration by sanitation workers in Memphis led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1968), another photograph was taken during a sit-in at a lunch counter in Birmingham, Alabama (1963), and another documents the March on Washington (1963). During Adams’s presentation in front of school staff and teachers, Cohen took handwritten notes during Adams’s presentation which quote him as having said, “My role as an artist is to evoke.”²¹⁹ Although Adams does not hold himself responsible for teaching the material represented in his art, he was willing to answer questions raised by Cohen and the school community. Reflecting back on this teacher training session over ten years later, Cohen maintains that it was a necessary and useful exercise.

Because there is so much depth to [Adams’s] piece, and because it isn’t overtly obvious, we felt that the teacher training would be advantageous. And I think it actually was. I think that it opened the piece up for quite a lot of teachers.²²⁰

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Michelle Cohen’s handwritten notes (5 November 1996)

²²⁰ Michele Cohen interview with the author (15 January 2010)

Adams on the other hand, when asked how he felt speaking about *Tributaries* at Long Island City High School responded by saying, “You can’t hand people something on a platter, especially not young people who need to learn how to process ideas and form their own opinions and interpretations.”²²¹ Adams point here is that an ideal situation—which for his work means a temporary public intervention—the audience comes to appreciate, understand, or dislike an artwork on their own terms, without the artist having to explain the work. In the case of a PAPS project, however, it is unrealistic and irresponsible not to provide as wide a point of entry as possible through which the community can engage with the artwork.

For many students, their first experience with an actual work of art will be at school. PAPS projects are therefore tasked with providing the first occasion for a student to think about what an artist does and why. This is a great responsibility. In the case of *Tributaries*—a sophisticated conceptual piece with explicit (but not blatantly obvious) historical references—the community stood to benefit from having a context from which to begin to consider the implications of the artwork. In *Art as Experience*, John Dewey compared experiencing art with experiencing science, and in doing so provided a convincing justification for why early experience of art benefits from introduction and instruction. Dewey explained that “everyone knows that it requires apprenticeship to see through a microscope or telescope, and to see a landscape as a geologist sees it. The idea that esthetic perception is an affair for odd moments is one reason for the backwardness of the arts among us.”²²² Just because a work of art is placed in front of a community, this

²²¹ Dennis Adams interview with the author (12 February 2010)

²²² Dewey, 53-54.

does not mean that this group will automatically appreciate the art or necessarily get anything out of it. If PAPS mission is to infuse schools with art that relates to contemporary practices and themes, the program should encourage artists and schools to approach the commissions as building blocks that will help students develop an understanding of contemporary visual language. In order to be a successful program, PAPS must find a way to accommodate the community's need for tools and services—teacher training sessions, artist lectures, explanatory panels, for example—in order to create a frame of reference and access point to an artwork.

CONCLUSION:

At the time of his commission and throughout the process of working on the concept and design, Adams was adamant that the role of public art was not to cater to the projected needs of the community, nor to please the masses. This upset the community, which expressed concern at various stages of Adams's project. The principal cautioned that having art in the hallways might cause students to loiter between classes; teachers who felt that the subject matter was not representative of the ethnic make-up of the school; and finally librarians complained that there was not any explanation for the artwork. And yet, despite Adams's refusal to adjust his final work in response to the community's opinions on any of these issues, his project has been singled out for praise. Cohen (PAPS), for one, lauds *Tributaries* claiming that it "ensure[s] that the [civil rights movement] remained fresh in the students' minds" despite the fact that "Adams' blurry video-based images are...purposefully cryptic."²²³ Certainly this is how PAPS would like to believe that Adams's work functions, but whether or not it succeeds in fulfilling this

²²³ Cohen, 152.

expectation is doubtful. Similarly, art critics have also pointed to Adams's project as being exemplary. Adam Gopnik for instance, commended the way in which Adams "commemorates history by refusing to commemorate it—by asking the students to open their minds in the free time they find between classes."²²⁴ Again, although it may be true that Adams's project has the potential to do what Cohen and Gopnik describe, neither of these quotes communicates the reality of *Tributaries*.

During a site visit to Long Island City High School in 2010, Patricia Glunt (Assistant Principal for Art, Business, Music, & Technology Long Island City High School) lamented the fact that most of the staff have no point of reference for *Tributaries*. Glunt herself has been at Long Island City High School since it was built. She remembers when the lightboxes were first installed and was in attendance at the teacher training session with Adams two years later. Most of the teachers at the school, however, are relatively new and information about *Tributaries* as not been passed down to the latest generation of Long Island City High School's community. During a tour of the *Tributaries* installation, Glunt wondered aloud whether the school was at fault or whether PAPS could do more to raise awareness for the artwork. The disconnect she describes is a fundamental problem of the PAPS program.

There is a gap between the moment when PAPS signs off on the installation of a final artwork and when the school takes control over the artwork. There is currently not an effective means of transferring all of the knowledge that the PAPS staff have regarding the origin of the artwork, the nature of its materials, and what the intentions are over to the school. Although PAPS provides documents describing each artwork (and

²²⁴Heiferman, ed., 12.

how to care for it) to the school at the time of unveiling, it rarely seems to make a lasting impact on the school's administration. Unfortunately, the people who have all of the insight and knowledge about the artwork (what makes it special and exciting) are not in the trenches, so to speak, to share this valuable information with the community. Part of the problem is that there is great flux in terms of the population of public schools—not only do new students enter the school each year, but teachers and staff also frequently turn over. Since the impermanent nature of the school community is unavoidable, developing methods of maintaining or recapturing a school's interest in PAPS projects is essential. PAPS administrators and the principal of each school should share this responsibility. As it stands now, the official sign-off and transfer of paperwork over to the school is not enough to insure that the community gets the most out of the artwork that has been entrusted into their care.

In 2010, Adams's lightboxes looked to be in terrific physical condition—having been refabricated in 2009 they were bright and crisp without any scratches or graffiti—however, there were signs that despite PAPS's effort to spruce up *Tributaries*, the school community still largely ignores the art. Most of the water fountains were covered with garbage from candy bar wrappers and soft drink bottles. While visiting all twelve drinking fountains, no students or teachers were seen using the fountains or looking at the art. Confirming the apparent lack of interest in *Tributaries*, Glunt confessed why she thinks that the students do not respond to this particular artwork. First off, she said that since there are not very many African-American students at Long Island City High School, the subject matter is not interesting to the majority of the students. She also suggested that some of the images were so abstracted that it might be hard for students to

even recognize what the imagery was about. Finally, Glunt said that she rarely comes across teachers who are interested in, or even aware of, the artwork, and so they do not introduce Adams's work to the students as part of any class discussions or projects.

As someone who is in the school everyday and who also knows the history and the intentions of the *Tributaries* project, Glunt's observations are extremely valuable. To sum up, it seems that the students of Long Island City High School are not engaged by the subject matter or the style of the artwork. Furthermore they have not received any kind of introduction to the artwork through teachers or staff at the school. David N. Perkins, who has done extensive research and development in the areas of teaching and learning through the arts, has pointed out that "considerable research on children viewing art teaches that viewers often do not see important aspects of the works."²²⁵ Perkins uses the following example to illustrate the fact that "inexperienced viewers tend to focus on the content and find their reaction shaped in large part by it."²²⁶ According to Perkins, "If James and Alice like horses, and if the painting shows horses, they like the painting."²²⁷ Applying this logic to Glunt's observation that the subject matter of *Tributaries* was not interesting to the students at Long Island City High School suggests that this could be partially due to the fact that the students were not used to looking at black and white photographs from the 1950s and 60s. The students have no frame of reference for this kind of imagery and therefore disregarded Adams's art. One option for how to rehabilitate *Tributaries* is through "integrated art." This style of art education incorporates art into non-arts curriculum. For example, using the didactic historical

²²⁵ David N. Perkins, *The Intelligent Eye* (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Publications, 1994): 18.

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Ibid.

material that Adams provided during the teacher training session, teachers at Long Island City High School could explain the imagery represented in *Tributaries* as the basis for a history or social studies class on the civil rights movement. This would not involve designing a formal curriculum based on Adams's artwork, but would enable teachers to draw students' attention to the artwork in relationship to a subject which is certainly already part of every American high school education.

Case Study #3 *Sound Carnival, 1996*

PS 244, Brooklyn
Mary and Bill Buchen, Artists

INTRODUCTION:

In 1993 the SCA received funding for an expansion project at PS 244, an elementary school in Brooklyn's East Flatbush neighborhood. The existing school building would be augmented with a new three-story classroom wing in order to accommodate increasing student enrollment. In addition, the renovation project would gain the school 5,000 square feet of outdoor play space.²²⁸ Construction was slated for completion by fall 1996. In accordance with the Percent for Art law, the PS 244 expansion warranted a budget of approximately \$160,000 to be used to commission an original artwork for the school.²²⁹ Because PS 244 was not a new construction, but a modification of an existing structure, the areas where art could be incorporated into the school were somewhat limited.

The artists who were selected for the PS 244 commission, creative collaborators Bill and Mary Buchen, are atypical of PAPS artists in they came to this project with extensive prior experience proposing, designing and installing public artworks. In fact, when they accepted PS 244 commission, they had just completed another project for PAPS. In 1992 they had unveiled *Sound Playground*, a participatory sound installation at PS 23 in the Bronx. This outdoor artwork is comprised of several interactive components including a hollow bronze table with matching seats (which also function as communal

²²⁸ "Minutes: Artist Selection Meeting, PS 244" New York City Department of Cultural Affairs_(15 June 1993)

²²⁹ Ibid.

drums), an echo chamber, and a parabolic bench. The Buchens's first PAPS commission received wide praise from the community of PS 23, art critics, and PAPS administrators alike. Summarizing the reaction of PS 23 students to the Buchens's work at the time of the school's opening, principal Carolyn Jones, told the *New York Times*, "The children really like the gradations in sounds."²³⁰ Art critic Eleanor Heartney described the appealing interactive component of *Sound Playground* by explaining that though the artwork's various elements "may look like abstract sculptures...they come alive when children use them."²³¹ *Landscape Architecture* magazine praised the Buchens as well, noting that they had impressively filled a "skinny 16,000 square-foot playground with more than two dozen ways to make creative noises while also learning about sound's habits and drowning out nearby subway screeches and police sirens."²³² And *New York* magazine referred to the positive effect of creating a sound installation in an urban setting, writing of *Sound Playground* the time of its unveiling:

Not even the screech of nearby subway trains and the all-day chorus of police sirens can distract the students of PS 23 from their playground equipment these days. The schoolyard, in the South Bronx, is now studded with sculptures that produce booming drumbeats and fun-house echoes.²³³

In addition to all of the praise *Sound Playground* received in the press around the time it was unveiled, Michele Cohen (PAPS) pointed to the great benefits of the Buchens's experience as professional public artists. She described the Buchens as "an incredible

²³⁰ Dulcie Leimbach, "Currents: Playground of Harmonious Sculptures" *The New York Times* (4 February 1993): Section C

²³¹ Heiferman, ed., 20.

²³² Eve M Kahn "Sonic Garden" *Landscape Architecture* (March 1992): 24.

²³³ Eve M. Kahn "Sonic Youth" *New York Magazine* (November 2, 1992): 22.

team to work with because they were already accustomed to the aesthetic and production of public art...I learned from them quite a bit.”²³⁴

For the majority of artists who take on a PAPS commission, the experience marks their first foray into public art, meaning they have never before developed permanent site-specific pieces or gone through the bureaucracy associated with government-sponsored projects. The Buchens, in contrast, brought to the table an impressive portfolio of successfully realized public art projects. In 1980 Bill and Mary Buchen formed SonArc, a design firm specializing in interactive installations for childrens’ museums, galleries, and public sites throughout the US.²³⁵ By the mid-1990s, at the time they were competing for the PS 244, the Buchens’s resume boasted numerous grants and honors from arts organizations including the National Endowment for the Arts, the Council for the International Exchange of Scholars, the New York State Council on the Arts in Architecture, and Design and Music and research grants from the Graham Foundation.²³⁶ The Buchens also had done numerous public art projects in the New York City including interactive art installations such as *Sound Observatory* (1990) and *Wind Gamelan* (1993) at Socrates Sculpture Park in Long Island City New York, *Drums Tables & Seats* (1991) for the Liberty Science Center in Jersey City, New Jersey, and *Sounds Fun* (1995-97) for the Children’s Museum of Manhattan.²³⁷ The Buchens’s wealth of previous experience, combined with the positive reactions their previous PAPS commission had received, made them highly qualified take on another public art commission for a school setting.

²³⁴ Michele Cohen and Grace Ramirez-Gaston interview with the author (15 January 2010).

²³⁵ “SonArc” website <http://www.sonicarchitecture.com/frm_htm.htm> (2 April 2010)

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Ibid.

Their status as professional public artists meant that they would be able to work well with architects and structural engineers, their approach to using sound as an educational tool was an appealing quality for a school commission, and their successful work with the PAPS staff to realize *Sound Playground* at PS 23 all worked in their favor during the artist selection panel for PS 244. Upon receiving the commission for PS 244, the Buchens developed an interactive sound installation, *Sound Carnival*, as a way for young students (kindergarten through fifth grade) to explore visual art, music, and learn about the physics of acoustics.

BEGINNING STAGES: ARTIST SELECTION & PROJECT APPROVALS:

In the spring of 1993 the DCA convened an artist selection panel to determine an artist (or artists) to create a public artwork for PS 244.²³⁸ During this time, numerous schools were under construction in New York City and PAPS had an inordinately high number of commissions to assign. Accordingly, PAPS and Percent for Art agreed to use a “super panel” system to conserve resources and energy. A super panel involves the same process as a typical artist selection panel except that instead of identifying artists for one particular school, the super panel was charged with culling a large selection of artists who would then be considered for several school projects. Cohen (PAPS) explains that “we had so many projects at one time that we couldn’t spend so much time on each one.”²³⁹ On May 21, 1993 Tom Finkelparl (Percent for Art) wrote to Bill and Mary Buchen to inform them that PAPS artist selection panel would like to invite them to present their

²³⁸ Minutes: Artist Selection Meeting, PS 244, New York City Department of Cultural Affairs (15 June 1993).

²³⁹ Email from Michele Cohen to the author (3 February 2010).

thoughts about a site-specific work PS 244.²⁴⁰ Finkelppearl suggested that the artists arrange a visit to the school to aid in their preparation of drawings or proposed concepts for the PS 244 site. In addition, Finkelppearl asked that the Buchens bring a selection of slides showing their most recent works.

The voting panelists for the PS 244 commission included Liza Lenas (Percent for Art), Lori Weisenberg-Catalano (SCA), Gregory Frux (DOE), Fred Montoya-Rodriguez (architecture firm Montoya, Rodriguez Associates), and Robert Scaglioni (principal of PS 244).²⁴¹ On June 15, 1993 the panel convened to hear presentations made by the five finalists: Che Baraka, Bill and Mary Buchen, Mary Miss, and Andy Yoder.²⁴² According to the official Minutes from this meeting, the discussion following the presentations “generated support for all of the artists.”²⁴³ However, some were seen as having greater potential than others. For example, although the panel found Andy Yoder’s work to be “warm and playful,” they were also critical of his presentation, expressing that it “was so diverse that it would be difficult to envision the outcome.”²⁴⁴ Reactions to Mary Miss’s proposal were generally positive, but the Minutes indicate there was concern that children might not relate to her proposal. One panelist is quoted as having described Miss’s work as “too sophisticated for the K-6 age group.”²⁴⁵ The reaction to the Buchens presentation was the most enthusiastic. The panel was pleased to see that the artists had a great deal of experience with public art commissions and felt confident that they would complete a

²⁴⁰ Letter from Tom Finkelppearl to Bill and Mary Buchen (21 May 1993).

²⁴¹ Minutes: Artist Selection Meeting, PS 244, New York City Department of Cultural Affairs (15 June 1993).

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

successful project for PS 244. In comparison to Yoder's vague ideas and Miss's questionably age-appropriate work, the Buchens came across as the best fit for PS 244.

According to the Minutes:

The panel felt that [the Buchens's] trans-cultural audio-video environments are excellent learning tools with which the children can easily interact. As artists they have a great deal of experience and have demonstrated history of completing successful projects.²⁴⁶

The panel embraced the interactive nature of the Buchens's work and felt that the educational component would be relevant the elementary school students. Determining what type of artwork is best suited for an elementary school (as opposed to a high school) is part of the panel process when selecting an artist. The way in which six to ten year-olds will relate to artwork is different from how teenagers will consider art and understanding the audience on this level is critical to the success of a public art project. According to the *Blueprint for Teaching and Learning in Visual Arts: Grades PreK – 12*, published by the New York City Department of Education in 2007, elementary school students “discover that ideas can be interpreted in many ways, and art making focuses the skills of imagination, observation and invention in service of exploring and expressing new ways of thinking and feeling.”²⁴⁷ Interactive artworks, like those created by the Buchens, are especially well suited to younger students who are learn through participation with and intuitive responses to art.

Another factor in the Buchens successful presentation is the fact that they had gone through the panel selection process before. They were therefore familiar with some

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ *Blueprint for Teaching and Learning in Visual Arts: Grades PreK – 12* (New York: New York City Department of Education, 2007): 4.

of the panelists, having worked closely with PAPS staff on the PS 23 project, and in general were well prepared to answer potential questions about their work. Reflecting back on their experience presenting in front of the panel Bill Buchen said, “Presenting before panels is an excellent way to develop presentation skills. You have to show your best ideas and hope you’re chosen.”²⁴⁸ The Buchens used their prior experiences to their advantage when approaching the competition for the PS 244 commission. It is possible that because PAPS had such high volume of commissions at this time, that working with an experienced team of artists would be seen as a welcome relief. Following the artist presentations, the panel voted 4-0 to give the entire art commission to the Buchens.²⁴⁹

The “Kick-Off” meeting for the PS 244 project was held on October 27, 1993. The purpose was to introduce the various parties who would be working together (artist, architect, PS 244 representatives, PAPS project managers, etc.), review the possible sites where artwork could be installed, set a construction and installation schedule, and discuss community involvement. During this meeting the Buchens briefly discussed their existing PAPS project, *Sound Playground*, and explained that they would like to take a similar approach to develop an artwork for PS 244.²⁵⁰ The Buchens indicated that they were primarily interested in three main areas at the school: the outdoor yard, the interior courtyard and the entrance vestibule. When they floated the idea of creating something for the outdoor yard, the architects warned that Principal Scaglioni had previously determined that there should be no play equipment in the yard because the school would

²⁴⁸ Bill and Mary Buchen interview with the author (19 February 2010).

²⁴⁹ “Minutes: Artist Selection Meeting, PS 244” New York City Department of Cultural Affairs (15 June 1993).

²⁵⁰ “Minutes: Kick-off Meeting PS 244” New York City Department of Cultural Affairs (27 October 1993).

benefit more by having open space. It is typical for schools that do not have large amounts of outdoor space to forego typical playground equipment—slides, monkey bars, climbing apparatuses, etc.—in favor of maximizing open space, which can be used for a variety of outdoor activities such as organized sports, fire drill, and line-ups. The Buchens explained that their proposal was not to build a jungle gym per-se, but to provide interactive sound-art that would provide a great play area as well as a stimulating learning environment for the students.²⁵¹ Based on this explanation, the panel ultimately agreed that an artwork designed for the PS 244’s new outdoor area would have a great impact.²⁵²

Because the Buchens’ proposal involved structural elements that would need to be incorporated into the overall design of the courtyard, the artists had to work very closely with the architects and the landscape designers in order to successfully integrate their art into school renovation plans. It was determined at the “Kick Off” meeting that the artists’ final proposal should be approved before the bid date (the deadline for when materials for the building expansion would need to be ordered) so that their design could be included in the architectural drawings and the installation of the artwork overseen by the general contractor managing the renovation of PS 244.²⁵³ Often times the relationship between the artist(s) and the general contractor can be contentious due to miscommunication and power struggles. According to Grace Ramirez-Gaston (PAPS) “certain projects require a tremendous amount of coordination and interface between the

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Ibid.

artist, the architect and the GC to make sure they are all on the same page and working together.”²⁵⁴

Part of PAPS’s responsibility is to ensure that the lines of communication between the various parties working on a school project are kept clear. PAPS also can act as an advocate for the artists if problems arise with the architects and/or general contractors. The architects typically pose problems during the artist selection process or initial design reviews. As Cohen (PAPS) puts it, “The thing about architects is that sometimes they profess to be receptive to artistic collaboration, but in reality they’re not...because the building is their artwork. I’ve had architects who have gone as far as to call an artwork a ‘decoration.’”²⁵⁵ Later on, once the art proposal has been approved and the construction phase begins, other problems have the potential to arise. For instance, if an artist has designed an artwork that is in anyway related to a structural element of the school (a stained glass window, a hanging sculpture, or a wall tile project, for instance) this will require working directly with the general contractor. The priorities on a typical construction site vs. what an artwork requires are often not in sync, and this can cause problems related to the proper handling and installation of PAPS projects.

In general the Buchens, who had a great deal of experience working with architects and general contractors from their prior public art installations, did not have a hard time collaborating with either party on the *Sound Carnival* installation. The artists do admit, however, that even with so much experience under their belts, working with the trade unions is always an adventure. Bill Buchen recalled two experiences, which he

²⁵⁴ Michele Cohen and Grace Ramirez-Gaston interview with the author (15 January 2010).

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

characterized as being some of the greatest obstacles had to overcome while working on a PAPS commission. With regard to the *Sound Playground* project Buchen commented that “working with trade unions is always an enlightening experience. At PS 23 there were flaws in the original concrete work in the back of the school and the whole project had to be ripped out and rebuilt at the contractor’s expense.”²⁵⁶ And when asked to describe a the greatest challenge he confronted during the *Sound Carnival* project, Buchen again replied, “Trade unions.” He went on to explain that the crew “had to dig through two inches of hardened asphalt and concrete by hand instead of using a backhoe.”²⁵⁷

The Preliminary Design Review for the PS 244 PAPS commission was held on December 15, 1993.²⁵⁸ At this time, the Buchens reported that they had been working in close collaboration with the school architects to maximize the potential for incorporating their artwork into the overall building design.²⁵⁹ This is an important aspect of the *Sound Carnival* project because it marks a successful blend of architecture and art, which PAPS defines as being key to the overall effectiveness of a commission. Not only does it make sense technically to have the general contractor oversee the installation of the artwork to make sure that it is flawlessly incorporated into the building and landscape design, but this collaboration is also a way to maximize the budget. (Materials purchased by the general contractor would not hit the Buchens's percent for art budget, but would be absorbed into the general construction budget for the renovation.)

²⁵⁶ Bill and Mary Buchen interview with the author (19 February 2010).

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ “Minutes: Preliminary Design Review” New York City Department of Cultural Affairs (15 December 1993).

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

At one point during the design review meeting, safety concerns were raised with regards to the Buchens's interactive sculpture. The Minutes indicate that one committee member said that the structural design of the Buchens' work "may expose the artists to additional liability."²⁶⁰ When asked to reflect back on whether the physical qualities or interactive nature of the Buchens's proposal opened the artists up to possible liability, Cohen (PAPS) pointed out that "There really aren't elements that they kids are going to climb on in terms of any great height...*Sound Carnival* is not a climbing playground."²⁶¹ Even so, Cohen also admits that "The Buchens did have to be very careful in designing with [safety] in mind in order to avoid liability."²⁶² Safety in terms of how students might engage physically with an artwork does not usually come up with PAPS projects, which tend to be confined to a wall or ceiling or else are otherwise protected from students climbing on them and potentially injuring themselves. When it comes to playground equipment, however, there are national and local safety guidelines to contend with.²⁶³ Recognizing that their work is in certain ways closer to playground equipment than public art, Bill Buchen explained that "liability insurance is required" and that part of the reason for founding SonArc was to deal with these types of legal issues.²⁶⁴ On March 1, 1994 a community review meeting for the Buchens's PS 244 project was held. Present at this meeting were the artists, representatives from SCA, DCA and DOE as well as several PS 244 community members including Reverend Arthur Bolder, Edwin Frux (a retired teacher), Dr. Rosina Lizzul (the Assistant Principal), Jerry Mann (a

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ Interview with Michele Cohen and Grace Ramirez-Gaston (15 January 2010).

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ Susan G. Solomon, *American Playgrounds: Revitalizing Community Space* (Lebanon, NY: University Press of New England, 2005) p.1.

²⁶⁴ Mara Hoberman Interview with Bill and Mary Buchen (19 February 2010).

representative of District Office 8), Wanda Roig (PTA President), Arthur Salvatore (Custodial Engineer) and Principal Scaglioni. The Buchens showed slides of several of their past projects (including *Sound Playground*) and then presented a detailed design proposal for PS 244, including drawings and a three-dimensional model. The proposal featured multiple components including wind chimes for the fences of the playground, a “drum circle” that would play off the reverberant properties of a large preexisting underground retention tank, and various “sound modules.” The Buchens also proposed plantings including ivy, bushes, and trees in certain areas of the courtyard to create visual and acoustic isolation. The following writing description lays out the Buchens’ intentions for *Sounds Carnival*.

To reflect the culture of the school community, the theme of *Sound Carnival* was chosen as a focus for the design planning with emphasis on traditions of folkloric celebration and musical invention. The educational setting calls for discovery areas where children investigate interactive phenomena and music making through direct physical interaction. These discoveries have direct application to curriculum studies of science, culture and mathematics.

The site demands careful attention to the use of space and sound levels. Between two and four hundred children engaged in energy releasing activities will be in each playground simultaneously. School administrators have requested allocating as much open space as possible for “line-ups” of large groups at the beginning and end of the school day. Nearby residential housing will be subjected to high levels of vocal activity by the children and sound baffling is needed in the outer playground. Interactive designs should channel and focus vocal energies into investigative activities. Decibel levels of interactive sculptural components, such as drums, cannot be greater than the children’s voices: and any introduced ambient sounds, such as wind bells, must be very subtle and musical. All other sounds are generated by human interaction. Safety and suitability of materials for a

permanent work in an elementary school are utmost considerations.²⁶⁵

This proposal is thoughtful and appealing on multiple levels. First of all, the title of Buchens's piece “Carnival” is a reference to the primarily Caribbean-origin cultural make-up of the PS 244 community. This shows the artists’ awareness of their audience and willingness to fit into the culture of the school community. Beyond the title the work, there are also visual references to the Caribbean. The “Palm Trees,” for example, are stainless steel pipes that can be played by slapping the open ends. The shape evokes the landscape of the Caribbean. The drum circle—bronze drums that also function as tables and seats—are Bata drums (hourglass shaped percussion instruments used in Haiti).²⁶⁶ Secondly, the Buchens’ proposal promote the educational values of their artwork explaining that making music using interactive sound-art has direct relationships to the math, science, and cultural coursework that the students will be addressing in school. Third, this proposal reveals a practical understanding of the space where artworks is to be incorporated. The Buchens recognize that there are two serious issues regarding the PS 244 site: one, the limited amount of outdoor space available at the school, and two the potential for noise pollution to invade the surrounding neighborhood during outdoor school activities. Instead of ignoring these potential problems or waiting for a situation to arise, the Buchens acknowledge them from the beginning.

Following the Buchens’s presentation, members of the community had the opportunity to raise questions about *Sound Carnival*. The custodian asked about the

²⁶⁵ Bill and Mary Buchen, “Description of *Sound Carnival*” (c. 1993)

²⁶⁶ “SonArc” website http://www.sonicarchitecture.com/frm_htm.htm (accessed 14 April 2010)

artwork's construction materials with regard to maintenance and cleaning.²⁶⁷ The president of PS 244's PTA questioned whether the artwork would hold the attention of the children in the long run and if there be enough playground space for the children.²⁶⁸ Responding to the question of outdoor space, Gregory Frux (DOE) explained to the group that the artist should not be held responsible for resolving an inevitable space problem.²⁶⁹ Principal Scaglioni strongly endorsed the Buchen proposal and stated that one of the streets adjacent to the school may be closed off as a play area during lunchtime.²⁷⁰ The Reverend Bolder also voiced his support for the *Sound Carnival* project.²⁷¹ At the conclusion of this meeting, the artists were given approval to proceed with their project according to their original proposal.

In 1995 the Buchens submitted an application to the National Endowment for the Arts for a Design grant for additional funding for *Sound Carnival*. The amount they requested (and which they ultimately were awarded) was \$13,000 (\$10,000 for the artists' time, \$2,500 for materials, and \$500 for travel.)²⁷² In the grant proposal the Buchens' described their project's intention to "engage children esthetically and direct them into an investigation of the world around them, especially into an exploration of natural phenomena."²⁷³ The fact that the Buchens applied for (and received) an NEA grant that would be put towards a PAPS project shows their advanced knowledge of what resources

²⁶⁷ "Minutes: PS 44" The Department of Education of the City of New York (1 March 1994).

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² Letter from Bill and Mary Buchen to Michele Cohen (27 May 1995).

Bill Buchen email to the author, May 23, 2010.

²⁷³ Ibid.

are available to fund public art. Their proactive attempt to gain additional funding for the PS 244 project is not only a testament to their dedication to make *Sound Carnival* as good as possible, but also shows yet another advantage that seasoned public artists bring to the PAPS process. However, it can also be argued that the fact that the Buchens felt it necessary to look for more money to complete their PAPS commission is problematic. The implication is that the Buchens were trying to create a project that would ultimately be more costly than the Percent for Art allocation could cover, which is not necessarily a wise idea.

On January 15, 1997 Cohen (PAPS) wrote to the Buchens to acknowledge *Sound Carnival* at PS 244 had been installed and officially accepted. Cohen writes, “We would like to compliment you both for your dedication and for the beauty and quality of your project.”²⁷⁴ On the same date, Cohen sent a letter to Principal Scaglioni to let him know that PAPS had done a complete inspection of *Sound Carnival* and found the artwork to be fully realized and successfully installed. Cohen wrote to Scaglioni that PS 244 “will soon receive control of the artwork” and indicated that her office would be forwarding the maintenance instructions to school custodian.²⁷⁵ This letter purports that the Buchens’ artwork is designed to require very little care, since it was fabricated out of the most permanent materials available. Cohen does, however, include a warning at the end of this related to the proper protection of this artwork.

It is critical however, to control the access to the outer courtyard during non-school hours. PAPS strongly recommends that this area remain locked when not in use

²⁷⁴ Letter from Michele Cohen to Bill and Mary Buchen (15 January 1997).

²⁷⁵ Letter from Michele Cohen to Robert Scaglioni (15 January 1997).

by the school. Proper security should eliminate risk of theft or vandalism and problems relating to noise.²⁷⁶

Cohen recommends preemptive vigilance as a means to protect against potential damages and/or noise complaints with regard to *Sound Carnival*. Putting artwork outside of a school comes with a whole other set of considerations in terms of maintenance and function. In the case of *Sound Carnival* the decision to bringing a sound element into a neighborhood community certainly required special consideration during the planning process and an additional level of oversight once the artwork was installed.

POSTSCRIPT:

In January 1997, shortly after *Sound Carnival* had been unveiled, a noise-related complaint was brought to the attention of the artists.²⁷⁷ The Buchens responded that the only way to solve the problem of unwanted use of the sound equipment was to keep the courtyard area locked before and after normal school hours. The Buchens wrote to Cohen (PAPS) to say that they were not responsible for noise complaints explaining that, “We have been working on the design components for the outer courtyard at PS 244 since its inception four years ago. During this entire period we have recommended the outer courtyard be closed before and after school hours.”²⁷⁸ They admit that “Use of the courtyard after school hours will create a noise and disturbance problem for residential units directly adjacent to the school property line” but maintain that this is up to the school to rectify by keeping the courtyard locked while school is not in session.²⁷⁹ In a

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

²⁷⁷ Letter from Bill and Mary Buchen to Michel Cohen (13 January 1997).

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

way this complaint can be seen as proof that students were engaged in the *Sound Carnival* installation. Although it is not ideal that the volume in the courtyard be augmented by artwork, especially when school is not in session, it is a positive thing that students were interested in interacting with the various sound installations.

Despite this early complaint, however, the legacy *Sound Carnival* is not as a neighborhood disturbance, but as an early example of interactive art in a public school. Participatory art is a relatively new trend in public art—certainly a far cry from murals or stained glass windows that dominated art in schools for much of the twentieth-century. The Buchens were “among the first school artists to fashion interactive work for children.”²⁸⁰ In the 1990s they helped pioneer a new way of thinking about how the public could react to (and with) public art. The projects they did for PAPS offer students opportunities to engage directly with the artwork and through physical interactions make discoveries about sound, materials, and the environment. More recently, there has been a push towards creating curricular models that integrate art into other school subject areas. In 2004, Barbara Decker and Jane Birdsall-Lander co-authored a public art curriculum kit, which promotes using public art as a way to solicit student responses based on “all senses” so that they will “become engaged and reach their own conclusions based on their direct experience exploring works of art.”²⁸¹ Very much in this same spirit of promoting education through actual art objects, the Buchens took it upon themselves to develop handbooks for PS 23 and PS 244. The guides were provided to teachers at both schools to explain the philosophy behind the Buchens’ projects. In addition, the guides

²⁸⁰ Cohen, 218.

²⁸¹ Emily Bumenfeld, Barbara Decker, and Jane Birdsall-Lander “St. Louis Curriculum Kit: Learning All Subjects Through Public Art.” *Public Art Review*, issue 34 (Spring/Summer 2006): 31

also provide sketches for lesson plans that teachers may use to encourage students to engage with, and learn from, the interactive sound elements. For example, in the “Teachers’ Guide to the Sound Playground,” the Buchens introduce the one of the interactive elements, the “Drum Table and Seats.” The guide recommends teachers organize the following activity:

Gather children around the drums and have them sit on the seats at each drum; 5 sitting at the big drum table, two at each of the small drum tables, additional children can stand to play. As the children to place their hands flat on the surface of the drum table. Ask them, “What does it feel like to you? Is it flat or bumpy? Is it smooth or rough? Is it cool? Warm? Is it soft or hard? Do you like the way it feels? (If anyone asks, it is made of a metal called bronze.²⁸²

The Buchens’ handbooks for *Sound Playground* and *Sound Carnival* are simple and straightforward—a valuable practical resource for teachers who want to encourage students’ interaction with the artwork. Artworks with a built-in participatory function provide an easy entry point for young students to engage with the work on their own terms, or under the guidance of an informed teacher.

CONCLUSION:

As career public artists who create interactive work for children, the Buchens seem particularly well-suited to design an artwork for an elementary school and were uniquely prepared to navigate the PAPS system. From their experience presenting in front of the artist selection panel through to the installation of their final artwork at PS 244 (which, notably, is permanently and fundamentally integrated into the structure of the school), the

²⁸² Mary and Bill Buchen “A Teacher’s Guide to the *Sound Playground*,” 1992

Buchens encountered very little drama or controversy while working on *Sound Carnival*. On paper the Buchens would seem a perfect fit for a PAPS commission and in many ways *Sound Carnival* represents an interesting theoretical model for public art in public schools, even if it does not live up to its full potential.

The Buchens approached their commission for PS 244 by coming up with a way for art to be used to supplement a school's pedagogical mission. The resulting artwork exemplifies the notion that art stimulates reflective thinking. As David N. Perkins, art educator and author of *The Intelligent Eye*, explains one way in which looking at art can help build mental and social skills:

Looking at art invites, rewards, and encourages a thoughtful disposition, because works of art demand thoughtful attention to discover what they have to show and say. Also, works of art connect to social, personal, and other dimensions of life with strong affective overtones. So, better than most other situations, looking at art can build some very basic thinking dispositions.²⁸³

Evaluating the Buchens's project based on Perkins's description of art's positive impact on thinking dispositions, it becomes clear that *Sound Carnival* represents an artwork its own right (in that it demands "thoughtful attention"), but it is also a teaching tool with strong connections to a variety of subjects. The National Art Education Association defines the goal of all elementary and secondary education in the arts as follows: "Basic knowledge in the arts includes understandings, appreciations, and skills that focus on the artistic qualities in each discipline. Such knowledge comes from studying each art form as both a creative learner and a participant."²⁸⁴ By making art that is meant to be touched, banged, listened to, sung to, and otherwise played with, the Buchens fulfill these

²⁸³ Perkins, 4.

²⁸⁴ National Art Education Association Platform and Position Statements (July, 2009)

NAE guidelines. In addition, by treating art as a tangible learning tool, the Buchens also aim to demystify the status of art in a school.

Another important aspect of *Sound Carnival* is that it attempts to bridge the gap between the “intrinsic” and “extrinsic” benefits of art, which are often pitted against each other in art education discourse as being mutually exclusive.²⁸⁵ The Buchens, however, created a viable model wherein it is possible to reap benefits of art that is “taught for its own sake” *and* “as a means to an end outside itself.”²⁸⁶ Describing how this participatory model for public art fits especially well with PAPS’s objectives, Michele Cohen explained in 2010:

There’s always been a desire for art to serve a pedagogical mission because the goal of schools is to educate, but the debate about how to best teach students and what they should learn is ongoing. I think since the very beginning of the [PAPS] program we were committed to a more interactive approach. A perfect example would be *Sound Playground*—a very early project that we did with the Buchens.²⁸⁷

PAPS administrators have found that art with intrinsic participatory elements can be a successful means of getting school communities to engage with public art, and this has helped expand the definition of what art in schools can and should be.

Because the Buchens’s practice has strong ties to playground design, it is interesting to consider *Sound Carnival* within the (abbreviated) historic and philosophical context of the development of American playgrounds. Lamenting the tendency of contemporary play areas for children to be wholly uninspiring, art historian Susan

²⁸⁵ Perkins, ix

²⁸⁶ Ibid.

²⁸⁷ Michele Cohen and Grace Ramirez-Gaston interview with the author (15 January 2010).

Solomon writes, “playgrounds used to reflect theories about how children learn; today they are largely unconnected to seasoned beliefs on the subject.”²⁸⁸ Solomon blames this in part on industry standards for product liability and personal-injury litigation, which she argues have made it difficult to design playgrounds that inspire children to take risks and benefit from interactive physical experiences.²⁸⁹ While working on *Sound Carnival*, the Buchens had to confront issues related to safety, but these limitations did not preclude them from developing an original and engaging play/learning environment for children. The overlap between play and art represents one possible way to reinvigorate the schoolyard. Although “national and local safety guidelines have restricted [the] ability to craft imaginative areas in which kids can play,” if playgrounds are thought of more as site-specific artworks, this context might open up new ways of stimulating children to play and explore, while also minimizing the risk of physical injury.²⁹⁰

An historic example that raised eyebrows about the potential benefits of integrating of public art practice and playground design is Isamu Noguchi’s design for a playground at the United Nations. In 1951 Noguchi made a proposal for a playground that consisted of “a series of fanciful abstract shapes.”²⁹¹ This concept was somewhat shocking at the time and because his vision was not consistent with the typical jungle gym, sandbox, and seesaw playground model, Noguchi was not ultimately awarded the commission. However, a scale model of Noguchi’s playground was exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in 1952 and sparked conversations about the possibilities for

²⁸⁸ Solomon, 1.

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

²⁹¹ Solomon, 24.

play areas to “boost aesthetic awareness and individual creativity.”²⁹² One critic writing about the MoMA exhibition proclaimed that Noguchi’s playground had “possibilities of stimulating the child’s sense of space and form through a playground designed as architectural sculpture.”²⁹³ A few years later, in 1954, MoMA co-sponsored a “Play Sculpture Competition” in hopes of inspiring designers to come up with playgrounds that would encourage “imaginary play as much as much as physical activity.”²⁹⁴ The connection between art and play has since been picked up on by programs such as PAPS, which has led to progressive art commissions that meld the functions and potential benefits of playgrounds and public art.

The Buchens’ intentions for *Sound Carnival* have strong ties to art education philosophies and to the public art tradition of outdoor sculpture, both qualities which would seem to give this project an increased chance of success. However this project, like many PAPS artworks, unfortunately has fallen short of fulfilling its great potential. As it turns out, *Sound Carnival* is not an integral aspect of the daily life of students at PS 244. Although it was intended as a means to close the gap that separates “Art” from “common life,” by providing a practical way for the school to use artwork as a creative and didactic teaching tool, in actuality this has not turned out to be the case. A phone call in 2010 to the school to arrange to visit *Sound Carnival* revealed a serious lack of interest and engagement with the work on the part of the school community. Although I was told that it would be possible to come by anytime to see the artwork, Leona Shapiro, a teacher at PS 244 who is also the school’s Arts Education Liaison, informed me that it was highly

²⁹² Ibid.

²⁹³ Ibid., 25.

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 29.

unlikely that the students would be outside. Apparently the students rarely go out into the courtyard and therefore do not have an opportunity to interact with *Sound Carnival*. A visit to the school in the spring of 2010 confirmed that indeed the students were not interacting with the artwork. This means that although the potential for students to explore *Sound Carnival* exists, because the school's administration does not promote the artwork as an available teaching aid, teachers do not make an effort to introduce students to the artwork. Although PS 244 has a great resource literally in their backyard, the community does not take full advantage of what *Sound Carnival* has to offer.

Case Study #4: *Mind, Health, Spirit, Body, 1999*

Walton High School, Bronx
Carrie Mae Weems, Artist

INTRODUCTION:

In 1992 it was determined that Walton High School's three-story brick building, which had been constructed in 1930 at 196th Street and Reservoir Avenue in the Bronx, was in dire need of renovation. Walton, a neighborhood school serving approximately 2,700 students the Kingsbridge area of the Bronx had historically faced overcrowding and was suffering from "gouged walls, broken doors and windows, as well as a lack of maintenance that produced collapsing ceilings and crumbling plaster."²⁹⁵ The SCA's modernization project for Walton was to provide the long-neglected school with a wholly revamped and properly air-conditioned facility (intended to make it possible to keep the school open year round), complete with a new sky-lit swimming pool complex. In 1998, after a five-year renovation process, the SCA officially declared the Walton modernization to be complete. However, according to members of the school community—including Walton's Principal, teachers, and staff—not only was the construction unsatisfactory, but the overall shoddy job actually made the building more hazardous. On October 3, 1996 (at which point the renovations had been in progress for three years) Bronx High Schools Superintendent, Joseph DeJesus, wrote to officials at the DOE stating, "This [renovation] project has destroyed what was once one of New York's grand high school buildings."²⁹⁶

²⁹⁵ Kevin Flynn and Tom Robbins, "Critics Hammer Shoddy Repairs" *New York Daily News*, 17 May 1998

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

According to an article published in 1998 in the *New York Daily News*, the SCA had at that point already spent \$54 million “restoring” Walton’s facility. Despite this hefty price tag, members of the school community testified openly about SCA’s terrible mismanagement of the renovation and the substandard construction work. In an attempt to draw attention to the abominable situation at her school, the principal at the time, Nicola Genco, went as far as to contact the press to publicly expose the disgraceful reality of the situation at Walton which included “peeling paint around the building, lack of heat, poor architecture, and the mismanagement of the pool.”²⁹⁷ Genco spoke to local newspapers and television stations, blaming the SCA for mishandling money and creating an unsafe environment for the staff and students. The *New York Daily News* reported that “Four times construction conditions became so bad that the school had to be evacuated.”²⁹⁸

One of the disgraces concerning the Walton modernization project was the near Olympic-size pool, which had once been the “pride of Walton’s Kingsbridge community” which had fallen into disrepair in recent years.²⁹⁹ Although the SCA promised a new pool and pool-house as part of the school renovation project, these were never completed. Illustrating the backwardness that characterized the entire Walton renovation project, the *New York Daily News* reported that the SCA-contracted builder went ahead with installing a \$15,000 wheelchair lift to enable handicapped students to reach the pool, but never finished work on the pool-house structure itself.³⁰⁰ The newspaper also reported that when the SCA declared that the renovation of the school had been completed, they

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

²⁹⁸ Ibid.

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

also revealed that an additional \$2.5 million would be necessary in order to restore the pool as had been originally planned.³⁰¹ Summing up the very unfortunate results of the Walton renovation project, Principal Genco is quoted as having said, “I have been telling my graduating students to come back and take a dip in the pool when it is reopened. Now I’ve dropped it from my speech. It’s the pool party that is never going to happen.”³⁰²

The situation at Walton is an extreme case where City funds were recklessly squandered. For the Principal to have gone to the press in order to bring attention to a dangerous environment involving school children is a desperate measure, clearly indicating her lack of trust in the SCA subcontractors to provide a safe and efficient renovation. The severity of the situation at Walton during the renovation is further reinforced by the fact that at one point things got so bad that the teachers union threatened to walk out.³⁰³

As one might expect given the atrocities associated with this SCA project, the art commissions that were awarded as part of Walton’s modernization did not survive unscathed. What seemed in 1992 to artist Carrie Mae Weems to be the perfect spot to speak to the Walton community through her artwork—the to-be-renovated swimming pool and sunlit pool-house—did not pan out at all as planned. Unfortunately, lack of communication between the SCA representatives overseeing this renovation project and PAPS staff, led to a situation wherein Weems’s project reached the fabrication stage before it was disclosed that her chosen site would actually not be a viable option. In the

³⁰¹ Ibid.

³⁰² Ibid.

³⁰³ Ibid.

end, Weems's mosaic panels (which she designed based on photographs she had taken of Walton students in their bathing suits) had to be relocated to another area of the school. The conciliatory decision to install *Mind, Health, Spirit, Body* in Walton's gymnasium compromised the artistic integrity of Weems's work and undermined its potential impact on the school community. In the case of an underprivileged school like Walton, where the community would not likely have much exposure to contemporary art, Weems's is likely many students' first experience with an in-situ artwork. The fact that art was treated so callously shows great disrespect for the school, the PAPS mission, and the artist's work. Although Weems and the other parties involved in creating an artwork for the Walton community entered into the project with the best of intentions, the quality of the artwork is not enough to overcome its context.

BEGINNING STAGES: ARTIST SELECTION AND PROJECT APPROVALS:

On April 21, 1992 representatives from the architecture firm, Lev Zetlin Associates, SCA and DOE staff, and Walton's custodian met at Walton High School to discuss the nature of the renovation project and to determine which areas would be appropriate for a artwork. The group, which included Fuad Motia (SCA), Michele Cohen (PAPS), Liza Lenas (DOE), Anne Ocone (PAPS), Henry Acre (SCA), Glenn K. Habel (Walton High School), and Daniel Margulies (Lev Zetlin Associates) toured the entire school facility and came up with a list of "preliminary options/locations for provision of Public Art."³⁰⁴ The areas identified included the auditorium lobby, auditorium vestibule, auditorium, main lobby, main entrance yard, and second and third floor corridors.

³⁰⁴ "Minutes re: Walton High School Project" Lev Zetlin Associates (21 April 1992).

Several weeks later Principal Genco wrote a concerned letter to Daniel Margulies of Lev Zetlin Associates. In this letter, dated May 15, 1992, Genco expressed alarm in having learned that a meeting about the construction project and the “provisions for public art for the school” had been convened at Walton without her knowledge (at a time when the school was closed for an official DOE holiday).³⁰⁵ Genco requested that another meeting be scheduled as soon as possible so that she could be present. Her letter concluded with the following condition:

Walton High School wishes to maintain a cordial and professional working relationship with everyone involved in the modernization project. I am prepared to assist you in any way possible; but, as Principal, I also have obligations to my concerned constituents.³⁰⁶

CC'd on this letter were, among others, the Superintendent of Bronx High Schools and a representative from SCA. The letter was passed on from the SCA representative to Michele Cohen (PAPS) who personally responded to Genco's complaint. On July 30, 1992, Cohen wrote to assuage Genco's concern explaining that the April 21st meeting was only a preliminary discussion and that no final decisions had been reached. Cohen wrote, “We had every intent of notifying you about the art selection process and encourage your involvement as well as that of your Parents Association and students.”³⁰⁷ Though unintentional, this confusion over the renovation plans and art commissions is an early example of poor communication and lack of transparency on behalf of several

³⁰⁵ Letter from Nicola Genco to Daniel Margulies of Lev Zetlin Associates (15 May 1992).

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

³⁰⁷ Letter from Michele Cohen to Nicola Genco (30 July 1992).

parties involved in the Walton project, which demonstrates the confusion that plagued the Walton project throughout.

On February 10, 1993 the Percent for Art office convened an artist selection panel for the Walton High School commission. The panel was chaired by Tom Finkelppearl. The voting panelists were: Henry Acre (SCA), Jim Reccione (Walton High School), Daniel Margulies (Lez Zetlin Associates), Michele Cohen (PAPS), and Liza Lenas (DCA). Also in attendance, serving as non-voting advisors were: Frank Palumbo (Bronx Borough President's Office), Vincent Raniolo (SCA), Ruth Seisel (Walton High School). To begin the meeting, Finkelppearl introduced the various parties involved in the project and discussed each of their roles with regard to the artist selection process, project management, and long-term maintenance of the artwork. The architecture firm then presented an outline indicating various possible sites for artwork, most of which were interior spaces.³⁰⁸ The art commission budget was set at \$247,000.³⁰⁹

Five artists were invited to present their ideas for Walton in front of the panel. The artists (all of whom had visited the school prior to this presentation session) included: Arun Bose, John Feckner, Nancy Spero, Carrie Mae Weems, and Janet Zweig. Each artist presented some background on his or her work and also described what s/he would hope to achieve at Walton, if given the opportunity. The panel generally responded positively to all of the artists, though reservations were raised about several of the proposals. For instance, the panel found Arun Bose—who proposed creating a fresco for the auditorium, lobby and vestibule of Walton—to be “not stimulating enough” and

³⁰⁸ “Minutes: Artist Selection Meeting, Walton High School, “ New York City Department of Cultural Affairs (13 February 1993).

³⁰⁹ Ibid.

possibly incapable of effectively communicating with students. Nancy Spero—who showed photographs she had taken at Walton with stencils of her design ideas—also impressed the panelists, but they ultimately agreed her proposal was not bold enough for the school environment.³¹⁰

The Minutes from this artist selection meeting indicate that Carrie Mae Weems presented an overview of her work. At this time, Weems’s work mostly consisted of museum and gallery projects dealing with issues of race and identity. Weems is, and was at that time, known for working in a variety of media to create works that are often described as folkloric. Typically her artworks tell a story (sometimes fictional, though often articulated through personal biography or historic context) which examines power dynamics and aims to debunk racist and/or sexist labels. At the time of this presentation in front of the PAPS selection panel, Weems had recently had a solo show at P.P.O.W. gallery in SoHo which *The New York Times* described as “an ambitious, and in the end deeply satisfying, attempt to explore the texture of black experience, and the way African culture, translated and transformed, continues to influence contemporary American life.”³¹¹ During her presentation in front of the panel, Weems would have come across as an artist with a clear signature visual vocabulary and thematic agenda.

As part of her presentation, Weems discussed her visit to Walton. The Minutes record her as having said that the artwork should “be everywhere in the school.”³¹² Weems is also quoted in the Minutes as having expressed that the artwork could not be

³¹⁰ Ibid.

³¹¹ Charles Hage “Review/Photography; Gullah Culture Casts its Spell.” *The New York Times* (November 27, 1992): C1

³¹² “Minutes: Artist Selection Meeting, Walton High School, “ New York City Department of Cultural Affairs (13 February 1993)

“too fashionable” and that it should “speak a language kids can relate to.” These comments indicate that Weems was aware that her typical practice might not be suitable for a public school project and imply that she would be able to modify her style and “language” to suit the needs of a public art commission. Following Weems’s presentation, there was a discussion amongst the panelists about whether her work might be too ethnically specific for a school commission. Ultimately, however, the panelists came to agree that since Weems had made clear that she would take a broader approach to a public work and create an intentionally positive image for the school setting, there would be no objection to considering her for the Walton project.³¹³ When asked to reflect back on her experience presenting in front of the panel, Weems recalled

I always find presenting in front of a group of people to be interesting and so I didn’t find [the panel] to be frustrating or intimidating or odd or weird. I just assumed that here was a group of people all of whom in some way or another had a vested interest in a successful outcome for this project... I think that those committees have a right to know who they are commissioning to do a project for them and one of the ways in which they can come to know that is for artists to present a sense of their past work and their history.³¹⁴

The panel voted and it was decided that Weems would split the art allocation evenly with Janet Zweig and John Feckner, each artist awarded \$82,000 to create three separate artworks for Walton High School.³¹⁵

³¹³ Ibid.

³¹⁴ Carrie Mae Weems interview with the author (17 February 2010).

³¹⁵ “Minutes: Artist Selection Meeting, Walton High School, “New York City Department of Cultural Affairs (13 February 1993).

Janet Zweig’s commission for Walton High School, *Your Voices* (1997), is an interactive artwork consisting of twelve bronze letterboxes that are mounted in the main lobby of the school. The boxes are inscribed with the following words: “wishes,” “fears,” “dreams,” “secrets,” “problems,” “opinions,” “worries,” “suggestions,” “fantasies,” “complaints,”

On March 29, 1993 Luis Cancel, Commissioner of New York City's Department of Cultural Affairs sent Weems an official offer to create an artwork in conjunction with the modernization of Walton High School. The letter explained that, should she accept the commission, Weems would be working closely with the three commissioning agencies: DOE, SCA and DCA. Cancel encouraged Weems to "work closely with the students and faculty of Walton, as well as various community groups in the area."³¹⁶ Six months later, on October 12, 1993, the SCA and DOE drew up a contract (# C000006647) for Weems.³¹⁷

On the subject of contracts for public art commissions, Tom Finkelpearl has pointed out that one major distinction when working for the City on a permanent commission (as opposed to for a private patron or a temporary exhibition) is that an artist cannot simply resign from a project if complications arise. Having signed a contract, failing to deliver the promised work could result in a lawsuit. Finkelpearl explains that just like the architect and general contractor hired out by the City, the artists "have agreed in a contract to provide certain services." That said, the PAPS contract is also intended to

"obsessions," and "ideas." Zweig created *Your Voices* so that students could write notes and put them into the letterboxes. Zweig envisioned that the letters would then be compiled and disseminated annually to the entire school. (Heiferman, ed., 70.) John Feckner has two installations at Walton High School. *Traces* (1999) is a glass panel interlaid with digital prints located in the school lobby. To create this piece, Feckner asked Walton students and teachers to nominate people who they felt "had made important artistic and humanistic contributions to society." Based on these suggestions, Feckner made portraits of the nominated individuals on lacquered magnesium plates, which are displayed alongside the signatures of the student and teacher nominators. Feckner's second installation, *Melody in 1's and 0's*, is a laminated glass panel above the main entrance (interior) to the school. The scene depicts a school-aged girl and boy, images from the local neighborhood, and references to classical instruments. (Heiferman, ed, 43.)

³¹⁶ Letter from Louis R. Cancel to Carrie Mae Weems (29 March 1993).

³¹⁷ "Contract: Project, Walton High School, Bronx" New York City School Construction Authority and The New York City Department of Education (12 October 1993).

protect the rights of the artist should unforeseen circumstances arise during a City commission. Weems's contract (which represents the standard agreement between an artist and the PAPS), for example, states "the goals of the parties" to be,

an artwork, which represents the creative talents of the Artist and satisfies the specifications of the Authority and the Board. The parties recognize that they must consult closely and cooperatively in order to accomplish these goals as they Artwork is fabricated, under the artist's personal supervision, in conformity with the approved final design and scope of the work.³¹⁸

This description gives equal weight to the three parties—Artist, Authority (SCA) and Board (DOE)—concerning the final scope of the work. Considering how Weems's artwork was compromised vis-à-vis the botched renovation plans for the Walton pool, this passage in the contract is highly relevant. One could argue that because the site for which Weems specifically designed her artwork became compromised, through no fault of her own, the decision to move her site-specific permanent artwork to another location was not in "conformity with the approved final design and scope of the work" nor an accurate representation of her "creative talents." However, by the time the decision to put her artwork in the gymnasium was reached, the artwork had already been completed. When asked whether she ever considered legal action against SCA or PAPS, Weems explained that she "made a series of phone calls out of frustration and anger that the school would be so wrongly treated" but never wished to get out of her contract and deny the school an artwork.³¹⁹

On May 14, 1993 Percent for Art hosted the "Kick-Off" meeting to discuss the areas that the architects believed would be the best possible locations for artwork at

³¹⁸ Ibid.

³¹⁹ Carrie Mae Weems interview with the author (17 February 2010).

Walton. In attendance were Tom Finkelppearl, two of the three artists commissioned for the site (Weems was unable to attend), architect Daniel Margulies, and Vincent Raniolo and Lori Weisenber-Catalano of the SCA. The phasing of the construction project was stressed to the artists to make them aware of when and how their projects could be incorporated into the building. Because this was a modernization project (versus an entirely new construction), the construction work had to be done in such a way that the school could be kept open. It was deemed highly important that the artists walk through the building with the architect and/or project manager to establish the site for their artwork.

On July 25, 1994, Tom Finkelppearl received a letter from Weems regarding her final site choice for her work at Walton. This letter provided a brief description of her proposal for Walton's to-be-renovated swimming pool and new garden. "After thinking it over," she wrote, "it seems practical to produce a piece of beauty and calm as well as one that is immediately related to education and learning." For the pool, Weems proposed creating, "several montaged computer generated ceramic tile wall pieces. Produced in fresco-like colors and black/white, the pieces make use of and reference historical paintings and contemporary photographs of swimmers and divers."³²⁰ This letter shows that Weems was thoughtful in her choice of where she felt her art would have the greatest impact on the school. Weems's letter is also significant because she refers to the distressing situation at Walton, alluding to the agonizing situation surrounding the renovation. She wrote, "As you know, Walton is difficult because of the overall lack of

³²⁰ Carrie Mae Weems letter to Tom Finkelppearl (20 July 1994).

morale.”³²¹ However despite the difficulty already apparent even at this early stage in the project, Weems was upbeat and intent to on creating a significant work of art for the Walton community. Her sign off to Finkelpearl included a heartfelt thank you, “I’d really like to thank you, the Department of Cultural Affairs, the Department of Education and the School Construction Authority for this incredible opportunity.”³²²

On December 14, 1995 the DOE hosted a Community Meeting to discuss the Walton art commissions. The purpose of the meeting was to have the three artists present their projects before members of the Walton staff and faculty as well as members of the Bronx neighborhood community. At this meeting, Weems presented her proposal to create six original mosaics for the school. She described how the tiled works would be fabricated in traditional mosaic style and then installed around Walton’s swimming pool or garden. Regarding the subjects for the mosaics, Weems explained that she would like to use individual Walton students. She proposed taking photographs of male and female Walton students in their bathing suits to use as models for the pool mosaics.³²³ Weems’s desire to work directly with the community shows a progressive understanding of site-specificity of public art wherein the integration of the community is as important, if not more to, to the “site” as is the architecture or design of the building. Miwon Kwon describes the function and potential benefits of what she refers to as “community-based site-specificity” as,

A group of people previously held at a distance from the artistic process, under abstract designations of viewer/spectator, audience or public are enlisted in this

³²¹ Ibid.

³²² Carrie Mae Weems letter to Tom Finkelpearl (20 July 1994).

³²³ “Minutes: Community Meeting Walton High School,” Department of Education of the City of New York (14 December 1995)

case to participate in the creation of an artwork.
Sometimes this absorption of the community into the
artistic process and vice versa is rendered iconographically
readable...³²⁴

Weems's proposal to involve the community at a fundamental participatory level—as models—is one way in which contemporary public artwork stands to become relevant and meaningful. Principal Genco agreed to do outreach in order to get student volunteers to pose for Weems.³²⁵ Weems also indicated that she would like to fabricate two simple text panels in conjunction with the mosaics, which would relate to “excellence in mind and body.”³²⁶ The panel approved this concept stipulating that when she had the final designs ready for the mosaics, she would present them to the Core Review Group and the school community.³²⁷ Reflecting back on this period of working out what she would like to do at Walton, Weems remembers, “I think I had a pretty strong sense of what I wanted to do and that didn't change over the course of working on the project really.”³²⁸

By 1996 Weems's proposal was more fully developed and nearing its final state. In a document that Weems prepared for PAPS she provided the following description of the mosaic installation:

Located in the pool area of Walton High School there will be placed four mosaic panels, three wood enameled silhouettes and a Walton High School plaque in mosaic tiles. All the work will hang facing the pool and the bleachers so swimmers as well as spectators can reflect on the artwork simultaneously during swim meets, class, practices, etc.

³²⁴ Kwon, 95.

³²⁵ Ibid.

³²⁶ Ibid.

³²⁷ Ibid.

³²⁸ Carrie Mae Weems interview with the author (17 February 2010).

The mosaic panels will each be 120 x 21 inches. They hang on the columns that line the pool's edge, one panel to each column. Each panel attempts to reflect a segment of the school body, two young men and two young women. Also on each panel above the head of the young student appears a one-word banner. The panels are simply rendered in a classic timeless style.

There will also be a name plaque with the artist's name, title, and date of dedication located somewhere in the pool area. Location yet to be determined.³²⁹

Also in this document, Weems addressed the project timeline with regard to the fabrication and installation of her mosaics. She stated that fabrication of the mosaic in Italy should take three months (including shipping to New York).³³⁰ She requested that her crew be allowed to install the mosaics before there was water in the pool and that, if possible, they be able to do a probe test prior to the installation date to determine how the work should eventually be hung.³³¹ Included with this final description and timeline was a conservation report, indicating that the mosaics are "by their very nature extremely durable" and the climate of the pool area should have no adverse effect on the tiles or their stability in the cement.³³² Also included was a final budget with a line-item breakdown totaling \$83,450.³³³

Responding to Weems's written description, Michele Cohen (PAPS), wrote to the artist on January 21, 1997 to follow up on several points, most notably Weems's budget. First off, Cohen informed Weems that PAPS would be unable to authorize a trip to Italy

³²⁹ Carrie Mae Weems "Project Description" (30 December 1995).

³³⁰ Ibid.

³³¹ Ibid.

³³² Ibid.

³³³ Ibid.

for Weems to oversee the fabrication of the mosaic tiles.³³⁴ (Weems had budgeted this expense at \$6,000.)³³⁵ Cohen suggested instead that Weems request samples of various color areas be mailed to her for approval.³³⁶ Though the request for an artist, or her assistant, to be present to oversee and approve fabrication is fairly standard in the commercial art world, an overseas trip is not an expense that a City agency can justify paying with taxpayer dollars. Secondly, Cohen conveyed that PAPS would also be unable to fund a project manager *and* an assistant for the art commission and that one of these line items would need to be eliminated.³³⁷ (Weems had estimated \$5,000 for a Project Manager and \$4,000 for her assistant.)³³⁸ Finally, Cohen reminded Weems that her design fee must be kept to twenty percent of the total commission, which Cohen calculated to be \$16,400 (as opposed to the \$20,000 that Weems had put in the budget for her own fee.)³³⁹ Percent for Art allocations are very strict—they cannot be rounded up and must be broken down according to specific budget line items that each artist is provided with at the time the contract is signed. The artist commission fee is not an arbitrary figure, nor is it based on the amount of time that an artist spends on the project. It is a fixed amount established in the contract based on a percentage of the total commission and this figure is non-negotiable.

Later in January 1997, Cohen wrote again to Weems, this time to recount what she had finally heard back from Walton’s principal regarding Weems’s proposal.

Apparently Principal Genco, speaking on behalf of the Walton community, expressed to

³³⁴ Letter from Michele Cohen to Carrie Mae Weems (21 January 1997).

³³⁵ Carrie Mae Weems “Project Description” (30 December 1995).

³³⁶ Letter from Michele Cohen to Carrie Mae Weems (21 January 1997).

³³⁷ *Ibid.*

³³⁸ Carrie Mae Weems “Project Description” (30 December 1995).

³³⁹ Letter from Michele Cohen to Carrie Mae Weems (21 January 1997).

Cohen that she was uncomfortable “limiting the ethnicity of the figures to African-American and requests that a Caucasian Hispanic be included.”³⁴⁰ Genco also conveyed that several members of the school community raised concern about the texts “Beauty” and “Grace” asking that they be replaced with the words “Health” and “Spirit.”³⁴¹ Cohen was diplomatic in relating these suggestions made by the school to Weems, writing,

I suggest that you take some time to think about these recommendations. I realize that in a public art project, it is often difficult to balance artistic vision with community expectations. I told Ms. Genco that you might want to meet with a group of students and teachers to get their feedback directly.³⁴²

The dilemma of how to maintain one’s artistic voice while also appealing to a diverse public is one that PAPS artists almost always have to confront at one point or another during the design process. For artists such as Weems, whose work typically deals with race in order to make a personal or political statement, making concessions to appease the “expectations” of the viewer presents a completely new way of considering the artist-viewer relationship.

Despite the new concern being applied to her work, Weems’s reply to Cohen indicates her willingness to take the apprehensions raised by principal Genco and the school community into consideration while working to finalize her design. Weems made a point to speak directly with Principal Genco about her specific concerns and wrote to Cohen in a follow-up letter:

The concerns over the Latino figure were shared by me, so we are able to come quickly to consensus. The changes [Genco] wished to make on the language was insightful and certainly appropriate. Therefore the words ‘Spirit’ and

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

³⁴¹ Ibid.

³⁴² Ibid.

‘Health’ will replace ‘Beauty’ and ‘Grace.’³⁴³

Weems further describes her Walton commission to Cohen in this letter as developing into a “positive, inclusive, uplifting, and very beautiful [project]” which she is “very excited...to contribute...to the New York Percent for Arts program and the Department of Education.”³⁴⁴

Where Weems was decidedly less amenable, however, in her response to Cohen was with regard to the budget. Responding to Cohen’s changes to her budget, Weems was quite indignant:

The project I am doing for Walton High School is...an extensive one. I’ve had to hire a number of freelance artists to assist with this project...I’ve traveled to New York from a number of places to meet with them, with you, with the school, the Percent for Art coordinators, the other artists, etc. When I received this commission I was living in California, not New York State. All this to say that I’ve traveled extensively in the production of this project already and invested a great deal of time and money.³⁴⁵

Weems admits to feeling put out by the level of commitment in terms of time, energy and money required by a PAPS commission. Not having worked on a public commission previous to the Walton project, Weems, understandably, was not accustomed to the way in which these types of projects develop—at a slow pace, with lots of meetings, revisions, discussions, and dedication. Money is often an issue when talking to PAPS artists and the general consensus is that the artist almost never makes any profit on these commissions, due to out-of-pocket expenses.

³⁴³ Letter from Carrie Mae Weems to Michele Cohen (5 February 1997).

³⁴⁴ Ibid.

³⁴⁵ Ibid.

Between 1997 and 1998 a slew of letters and memos were sent back and forth between Michele Cohen (PAPS) and Wendy Kalen (the SCA project manager of the Walton High School renovation.) In retrospect this dialogue should have raised flags about the status of the completion of the pool renovation. However, even as it became increasingly clear that the renovation would not occur, Weems was not apprised until it was too late to do anything. On May 23, 1997 Cohen wrote Kalen asking for follow up on a query from several months earlier “concerning the installation schedule for the pool mosaics.”³⁴⁶ Cohen mentioned that Weems’s mosaics were currently being fabricated and that it was necessary to set a date for installation prior to the pool being filled so that a scaffolding could be mounted in the pool in order to facilitate hanging the mosaics.³⁴⁷ Kalen replied to Cohen on June 5, 1997 with a memo indicating that the pool would be completed in September 1997 and that Weems should plan on installing the mosaics at that time.³⁴⁸ However, in September Cohen received another memo from Kalen revealing that at that time construction work on the pool was still “progressing.”³⁴⁹ In March 1998, nearly a year after the conversation about the completion date for the pool first began, Kalen wrote again to Cohen to say that the “pool work art is on hold indefinitely pending the resumption of pool restoration work.”³⁵⁰ Right around this time Weems got in touch with Cohen to report that the mosaics had been completed and would be ready to be shipped from Italy once a firm date for installation has been established. By this point, Weems had traveled to Italy to inspect the mosaics and in a letter dated March 22, 1998

³⁴⁶ Letter from Michele Cohen to Wendy Kalen (23 May 1997).

³⁴⁷ Ibid.

³⁴⁸ Memo from Wendy Kalen to Michele Cohen (5 June 1997).

³⁴⁹ Memo from Wendy Kalen to Michele Cohen (25 September 1997).

³⁵⁰ Letter from Wendy Kalen to Michele Cohen (13 March 1998).

expressed to Cohen that she was “anxious to bring this project to a close and look[s] forward to installing the work as soon as possible.”³⁵¹

In November, 1998, having finally been apprised of the reality of the pool renovation situation, Weems went with Cathie Behrend of Percent for Art to do a site visit at Walton. The purpose of the visit was to determine an alternate location for the already-fabricated mosaics. At the school, Weems and Behrend met with the head of the physical education department as well as the head of school security. The group toured the facility looking at “several hallways, classrooms, the auditorium and the small and large gyms.”³⁵² In a memo describing the outcome of the site visit, Behrend wrote the following: “Carrie, although not totally happy, chose the large gym for the murals.”³⁵³ Behrend also noted that the head of Walton’s physical education department, on behalf of the school, expressed that he was pleased by this decision.³⁵⁴ Due to the change in hanging location, it was deemed necessary that Weems receive the architectural drawings of the gym to show her fabricator before installation could proceed.³⁵⁵ Accommodations to the mounting and hanging system for the mosaics would need to be adjusted according to the specific nature of the gym walls.

Weems’s initial written reaction to this turn of events was much less stoical than Behrend’s memo indicates. In a letter Greg Frux at PAPS dated November 20, 1998, Weems wrote,

I must say that I’m not happy about the situation at Walton High School. I’ve spoken with an Inspector General

³⁵¹ Letter from Carrie Mae Weems to Michele Cohen (22 March 1998).

³⁵² “Memo: Walton High School” (16 November 1998).

³⁵³ Ibid.

³⁵⁴ Ibid.

³⁵⁵ Ibid.

Officer and was told that Walton, the SCA and the enlisted contractor are currently under investigation for the horrible job done at the school; the school was shamefully robbed, the damning evidence is everywhere.

Perhaps one day the pool at Walton High School will be completed, however, at this time, there is no deadline for completion. I'm torn over what to do—all my hopes are dashed for a beautiful installation in the pool area. The idea of just slapping the four mosaics up in the gym sickens me, and seems so unfair, so disrespectful to my efforts, to the students and to the school. It's a careless afterthought—much like the renovation work at the school. My conscience simply won't let me participate in the robbery of these students.³⁵⁶

It seems that having ruminated on the situation, Weems's impression of the handling of the whole situation at Walton greatly soured. Accordingly, her ideas about what it means to produce a work of art for a public school were, to use the artist's own word, "dashed." Weems's anger and frustration go beyond the fact that the location for which her work was intended was no longer possible. Not only was Weems's own ego injured but, furthermore she felt great anger that the students at Walton had been robbed of a chance for a modernized facility complete with meaningful art.

Beyond the conceptual compromises made to enable Weems's mosaics to be installed in the gym, there were also more concrete issues to consider, including how the works would be hung in this new location. Technically speaking, adjustments to the hanging hardware and framing became a necessary additional expense in order to prepare the mosaics to be hung in the gym. Weems suggested that the existing panels would need to be mounted differently for "technical and aesthetic reasons."³⁵⁷ When asked in 2010 to speculate on whether or not the pool project would ever be completed at Walton, Michele

³⁵⁶ Letter from Carrie Mae Weems to Greg Frux (20 November 1998).

³⁵⁷ Ibid.

Cohen replied, “I don’t see those mosaics ever being moved.”³⁵⁸ Further indication that *Mind, Health, Spirit, Body* was not generally thought of as a “successful” project is its absence from both Cohen’s 2009 ostensibly comprehensive tome *Public Art for Public Schools* and the PAPS website.

POSTSCRIPT:

Following the initial shock in learning that her mosaics would no longer be able to be installed in the location for which they were expressly conceived of and designed for, Weems was able to adjust to this unforeseen complication. Writing to Greg Frux in November of 1998 she was optimistic: “The idea is to create a pleasing, meaningful, carefully considered aesthetic environment in the gym that incorporates as many of the earlier design ideas as possible.”³⁵⁹ In this same letter Weems also offers that “In order to bring this project to a rapid close, I will work closely with Mrs. Genco, the school Principal, so that the new design elements could be quickly approved...”³⁶⁰ In a follow-up letter to Frux dated December 18, 1998, Weems thanks Frux for spending time with her and writes that she is “really very happy that we’ve discovered a proper location for the four mosaics at Walton High School.”³⁶¹ In this final correspondence regarding *Mind, Health, Spirit, Body*, Weems admitted that “while not my first choice, the gym is really quite lovely, the light exquisite and the space elegant. The pieces will be striking...”³⁶²

³⁵⁸ Michele Cohen interview with the author (15 January 2010).

³⁵⁹ Letter from Carrie Mae Weems to Greg Frux (20 November 1998).

³⁶⁰ Ibid.

³⁶¹ Letter from Carrie Mae Weems to Greg Frux (18 December 1998).

³⁶² Ibid.

To this Frux responded that he agreed Weems had “found a really good design solution by installing the mosaics in the gymnasium.”³⁶³

By late December 1999, *Mind, Health, Spirit, Body* was completed and installed at the gym of Walton High School. In her final correspondence to Frux on December 21, 1999, Weems was ecstatic and reflective. She wrote, “Finally!! I can’t believe I’m finished with this project; it has been an extraordinary experience and I’ve learned a great deal.”³⁶⁴ Although Weems’s mosaics are beautifully crafted and executed and despite her success in engaging the school community (as models for the mosaics), all of this is compromised when the works are shown out of their intended context. Whereas most museum and gallery art can be shown in a variety of locations and contexts, PAPS works are for the most part site-specific. Certainly in the case of *Mind, Health, Spirit, Body* the context of the pool would have made the mosaics relevant and celebratory in a way that they will never be as long as they remain in the gym.

A visit to Walton, which has now been divided up into four separate schools: The Celia Cruz Bronx High School of Music, Discovery High School, High School for Teaching and the Professions, and Kingsbridge International High School, in 2010 confirmed that the pool has yet to be renovated and that Weems’s mosaics are still in the gym. As Weems’s 1998 letter indicated, the light is very nice and the gym itself is an attractive well-maintained facility. However, when seen in the context of the basketball hoops and bleachers, the portraits of Walton students in their bathing suits with the words “Mind” and “Body” appear ridiculous. The mosaics are in excellent physical condition, but look extremely out of place in the context of a gymnasium. During the site visit in

³⁶³ Letter from Greg Frux to Carrie Mae Weems (23 December 1998).

³⁶⁴ Letter from Carrie Mae Weems to Greg Frux (3 January 1999).

2010 the school custodian, Glenn Habel, mentioned that plans to build a new pool are again underway. This news is encouraging for the school in general and, more specifically, for Weems's artwork. There may still be an opportunity to place the mosaics in their intended context. Grace Ramirez-Gaston (PAPS) had been unaware that the pool was again under construction, but now that it is on her radar she will keep in touch with the school to arrange to relocate the mosaics if and when the pool is completed.

CONCLUSION:

This case study provides an occasion to discuss the importance of site to PAPS projects, as well as to public art in general. The fact that Weems designed her artwork for a specific physical site (one which intentionally had connotations of physical health through water exercise) at Walton and was then forced to relocate the final artwork compromises the effect her artwork has at the school. Unlike museum or gallery exhibitions, in which more or less autonomous objects can be exhibited in a variety of settings and contexts, most government-sponsored public art is created to permanently adorn a predetermined site. Although Weems's Mosaics were not structurally integrated into the design of the pool house (like, for instance *Mnemonics*, which is built into the walls of the school or even *Tributaries*, which was designed to fit into a predetermined water fountain model), this does not mean *Mind, Health, Spirit, Body* is not site-specific.

Interestingly, the same year that SCA began work on the Walton renovation project and while the PAPS artist selection panels were getting started, a case of "misplaced" public art (also in the Bronx) made news headlines and raised important

questions about the role of public art and the importance of site to the overall impact of public art. In 1991, Bronx-based artist John Ahearn installed three portrait sculptures of local community members on a traffic medium in the South Bronx, across from the 44th Police Precinct.³⁶⁵ Within a week the artist had the sculptures removed at his own expense due to community outrage. The artwork had been commissioned by the Percent for Art program through a panel comprised of community representatives, art professionals, and government art administrators. Similar in concept to Weems's *Mind, Health, Spirit, Body*, which sought to glorify local community members, Ahearn decided to make portrait sculptures representing three real people from his own South Bronx neighborhood. According to Jane Kramer, who has written extensively about Ahearn's Percent for Art commission and the circumstances that led to his statues being removed from their original location, the artist's point of reference for casting bronze statues was the honorific Paseo de la Reforma in Mexico City, "a mile of bronze heroes."³⁶⁶

At the time of his Percent for Art commission, Ahearn was well known for his work in the community (he was himself a resident of the South Bronx) and had previously done numerous portraits (self-funded) based on his friends and neighbors, all of which had been generally well received by the community. Several of his portraits were installed in the neighborhood in the 1980s. For instance, *Back to School* (1985), a permanent mural on the side of a building at Walton Avenue and 170th Street.³⁶⁷ Ahearn's practice involved working within the public domain; often he would make castings of local people out on the street corner for all to see. Although Ahearn was not born in the

³⁶⁵ Kwon, 56.

³⁶⁶ Jane Kramer, *Whose Art Is It?* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994): 38.

³⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 66.

Bronx (he hails from Binghamton, New York) and does not share ethnic ties to the areas predominate African American and Puerto Rican make-up (he is white), the artist was a visible member of the South Bronx community and often collaborated with a local artist of Puerto Rican descent, Rigoberto Torres (who Kramer affectionately refers to as “a Walton Avenue kid.”³⁶⁸ In the 1980s Ahearn and Torres made castings of their neighbors in the Bronx and were also in a Times Square group show with Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring, among other young rising art stars.³⁶⁹

Ahearn worked alone on the Percent for Art commission, but based on his strong ties to the community and his previous positive experience using community-members as models, the Percent for Art panel approved Ahearn’s three maquettes for the 44th Precinct without hesitation.³⁷⁰ The final portraits were bronze casts of Ahearn’s neighbors, Raymond Garcia (a Puerto Rican man depicted in a hooded sweatshirt with his pit bull, Toby), Corey Mann (a large African-American man depicted without a shirt and holding a basketball and with one foot propped up on a large boom box), and Daleesha (an African-American teenage girl depicted on roller-skates.) However, when the sculptures were installed and unveiled at the site in front of the 44th Precinct, neighbors, politicians and the press voiced outrage that the artwork did not honor the local community, but instead promoted the police’s distorted (racist) vision of the South Bronx community.³⁷¹ Kramer has described Ahearn’s initial reluctance to do a project related to the police station writing: “He didn’t really feel comfortable having anything to do with a

³⁶⁸ Ibid, 54-58.

³⁶⁹ Ibid, 60.

³⁷⁰ Kwon, 89.

³⁷¹ Kwon, 91.

police station, especially in a place like the South Bronx, where the line between the police and the people was so implacably drawn.”³⁷²

In the early 1990s there was a push to reclaim public art as a community-based public service, Ahearn, therefore, seemed an ideal candidate for a Percent for Art commission. However, what the artist and the panelists failed to realize is that site specificity is a complicated construct with physical and contextual implications. Although Ahearn intended to address a post-*Tilted Arc* notion of site-specificity—one in which the authenticity of the site would be acknowledged by community-based realism—the context of the police precinct made his artwork appear offensive.³⁷³ Just because the community is represented in the artwork does not guarantee that said artwork will be seen as a celebration of local heroes (especially in a community that had no such celebratory culture.) After Ahearn removed the three sculptures from the Precinct, they were relocated to Socrates Sculpture Park in Long Island City, Queens where they remain to this day. The sculptures that were seen as offensive in the context of the police precinct, were eventually relegated back to an art world context where their relationship to the South Bronx community is completely undermined and virtually meaningless as well as invisible.

The trajectory of Ahearn’s sculptures is relevant to Weems’s PAPS project for several reasons. First of all, both artists aimed to create artwork that would be integrated into the “site” through its direct link to the community. Ahearn’s and Weems’s portrait subjects and the way in which they depicted their models intended to attach the artwork to a specific site and yet, in both cases, the artworks do not grace their intended locations.

³⁷² Kramer, 74.

³⁷³ Kwon, 84.

Although the reasons why differ, the implications of re-contextualizing community-based art are fundamentally similar. As Miwon Kwon has said with regard to Ahearn's project,

A central objective of community-based site-specificity is the creation of a work in which members of a community—as simultaneously viewer/spectator, audience, public and referential subject—will see and recognize themselves in the work, not so much in the sense of being critically implicated but of being affirmatively pictured or validated.³⁷⁴

Relating this interpretation to the case of *Mind, Health, Spirit, Body* reveals how Walton's community was robbed of the chance to feel celebrated by the art. In fact having portraits of students in their bathing suits in the context of the gymnasium makes a mockery of the community and highlights the many ways in which Walton has been mistreated by the SCA and DOE.

As has been discussed earlier in this thesis the "site" for an artwork describes more than just the physical geographic location—it also can describe the context and community. Terms such as "context-specific," "debate-specific," "audience-specific," "community-specific," and "project-based" have been used at different times to describe public artworks and are a step in the right direction as far as acknowledging the complex art-site relationship.³⁷⁵ In the case of *Mind, Health, Spirit, Body* the context is a crucial component of the overall "success" of the piece. Describing her intentions for making artwork for Walton, Weems said in 2010:

...what I really wanted to do more than anything was to invest in the school and in the students who were there at that time. I wanted to make a work that really involved them and so I photographed them. And my mosaics were based on these photographs that I did. That to me was

³⁷⁴ Kwon, 95.

³⁷⁵ Kwon, 2.

something very important that the art not be this sort of heroic art that is removed from the people actually at the school, but that it be based on the people of the school itself, its history, the alumni. In a few years the students would be able to come back and point to a mosaic and say, 'That was me when I was sixteen.' They were meant to represent in the strongest way, the body of the school.³⁷⁶

Weems's idea to use Walton students as models for her mosaics was a means of relating the artwork directly to the community and glorifying the students themselves. However, just as it would be inappropriate for students to attend gym class in a bathing suit, the pride and celebration intended by the mosaics loses validity when displayed in the context of the gym.

Describing the impact relocation has on public art, critic Eleanor Heartney points specifically to the case of *Mind, Health, Spirit, Body*. She writes "...by any traditional standard Carrie Mae Weems's beautifully executed mosaics for Walton High School in the Bronx would be considered highly successful. But when [the pool renovation] didn't happen [the mosaics] were placed instead in the gym...Does this affect their 'success' if we define success as a seamless integration into the site?"³⁷⁷ Having visited the school and seen the mosaics in the gym, the answer to this question is "yes." This case study is a valuable lesson demonstrating how site-specificity, an essential component of PAPS artworks, can make or break the effect and effectiveness of the final artwork.

³⁷⁶ Carrie Mae Weems interview with the author (17 February 2010).

³⁷⁷ Heiferman, ed., 22.

**Conclusion:
What can be learned and suggestions for improvement**

A “perfect public artwork” is a contradiction in terms, and due to the numerous variables unique to each commission, there will never be a uniform or consistent “right way” to approach or assess public art. Although the liberal and humanist desire to “democratize” art has long fueled public art initiatives such as PAPS, there is still a long way to go in terms of reconciling art and public interest.³⁷⁸ That said, there is value in exploring issues that routinely cause problems during commissions and in offering suggestions for how the PAPS program (and by extension other similar public art programs) might be improved.

The four case studies detailed in this thesis offer a wealth of practical insight into the complex and under-examined genre of public art. Without making sweeping statements about the overall success of the program, this thesis highlights instances where PAPS artworks have had measurable positive impacts and identifies areas for improvement. The suggestions put forth in the conclusion take into account the process that turns out the PAPS artwork, the physical and conceptual nature of the artworks themselves, as well as the public’s reactions. By considering these projects with respect to their social, political and pedagogical imperatives, this thesis aims to establish a dedicated public art discourse that takes into account equally crucial, but inherently cacophonous, perspectives and motivations, which until now have been largely segregated into art-issues, social-issues, and practical-issues. The following suggestions

³⁷⁸ Kwon, 107.

are intended to be relevant to and understood by all of the various parties who work together to make sure there is artwork in New York City's public schools.

ARTIST SELECTION & PREPARATION:

Selecting a suitable artist for a PAPS commission is key to realizing a successful final project. The democratic artist selection process that PAPS uses, though not necessarily the most efficient method (art-by-committee is, by nature, slow and arduous), is designed to determine the best artist(s) for each job. Dialogue is encouraged and accountability assumed, which increase the chances that the final artwork will address the various needs expressed by the community representatives and also fulfill the requirements of the PAPS program.

The fact that the Percent for Art Image Registry is open to “any professional visual artist” is in keeping with the democratic ideals of public art.³⁷⁹ Artists on the registry come from diverse backgrounds and possess varying levels of experience, which means that the program is amenable to different perspectives and new ideas. This diversity ensures that PAPS artworks keep up with constantly changing trends in contemporary art. In an interview in 2010, PAPS founding director Michele Cohen, remarked that one of the ways in which she believes PAPS has thrived since being its inception (just over twenty years ago, now) is by continuing to “adapt to new media” and therefore keeping pace with relevant art-making practices.³⁸⁰ It is important that PAPS welcomes and seeks out new artists who will suggest new styles of art-making for school

³⁷⁹ Percent for Art Image Registry

<<http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcla/html/panyc/form.shtml>> (accessed 14 April 2010)

³⁸⁰ Michele Cohen interview with the author (15 January 2010).

art. Another positive aspect about the current system for artist selection is that Percent for Art culls artists from the registry (and from other sources) for each artist selection panel to review and vote on. Prescreening artists so that the panel of community members and non-art professionals can rest assured that whoever they decide on from the pool will be capable and professional, is a valuable service that arts administrators provide. According to Shelly Willis, “It is critical that public art programs include curatorial staff with time and expertise to research and find the right artists for a projects and make recommendations to committees.”³⁸¹

In addition to the laudable features of PAPS’s artist selection process, there are several ways in which the process could be improved. First off, PAPS should do more to publicize the Percent for Art Image Registry so that there will be even greater diversity in the type of artists competing for commissions. It would be especially beneficial to do outreach into the communities where new schools are being built to find artists who may have a special connection to a particular site. Working with an artist who is attached to a school site on a personal level—perhaps s/he lives in the community, has children who attend the school, attended the school once him/herself, or has ties to the cultural make-up of the neighborhood—would help greatly in terms of involving the community in the project and realizing an artwork that relates to the physical site and the community’s needs. If PAPS’s goal is to create truly “public art” instead of putting art in public places, it is important to start with an artist who understands the public and wants to find a way to address them directly. Furthermore, in order to maintain true democracy, it is

³⁸¹ Cartiere and Willis, 156.

crucial that PAPS aim to educate and enlist as many people as possible to enter into the Percent for Art Registry instead of limiting the pool to a self-selected group of artists.

An example of an upcoming PAPS commission involving an artist with a unique tie to the school site is Art Spiegelman's design for the High School of Art and Design in Manhattan. The school, which was founded in 1936, is moving to new facility that will be built on 57th Street and 2nd Avenue. When the principal heard that the new construction would qualify the school for a Percent for Art commission, he took it upon himself seek out alumni who might be interested in competing for the PAPS commission. Because the High School of Art and Design is an art school, naturally there were more artist-alumni than at a typical public school. The principal approached Spiegelman (who graduated from Art and Design in 1965) directly and encouraged him to compete for the PAPS commission.³⁸² Spiegelman, who was not aware of the Percent for Art process or the PAPS program prior to being contacted by the principal, was touched that his alma mater thought of him to do a permanent artwork for the school. Spiegelman admits that had the commission been for any other site, he would not have been interested in doing a public art project, but in this case he just "could not resist doing something for [his] own high school."³⁸³ In the presentation he made in front of the artist selection panel Spiegelman admitted that, "Until now I've had little urge to make anything more site-specific than say covers for *The New Yorker*. Now the possibility of working through the Percent for the Art program on a site so specifically connected to my beginnings as an artist, The High School of Art & Design that I graduated from in 1965 is irresistible."³⁸⁴

³⁸² Art Spiegelman interview with the author (8 March 2010).

³⁸³ Ibid.

³⁸⁴ Ibid.

Spiegelman is currently working on the design for a stained-glass window that will be part of cafeteria at the new High School of Art & Design. The panels will be done in his signature cartoon-style and will depict vignettes related to the artist's own experience at the high school. The strong connection between this artist and the school comes through in his dedication to the project and the nature of the artwork he is creating. Because of the intrinsic connection between the artist, the school community, and the site, this PAPS project has an increased chance of translating into a deeply meaningful artwork for that school. Miwon Kwon has described the "home-team advantage" of working with local artists on public commissions: "the artist's relationship to a group of people, a particular neighborhood, or a city plays a crucial role in the type of collaborations that are logistically and creatively possible."³⁸⁵ In other words, an artist from the community, or one who has a strong attachment to the community, is more likely to produce an artwork that will speak to the public. Certainly not all PAPS projects can be born out of this particular type of close bond between artist and site, but it would behoove PAPS administrators to seek out artists who do have ties to the local school communities in order to foster a vital connection between artist and public.

Of course there are other factors to consider as well when selecting an artist, beyond his/her purported connection to a particular site and/or community. As with the case of John Ahearn's Percent for Art commission, the fact alone that the artist was based in the community where he was commissioned to create a permanent site-specific artwork through Percent for Art, did not insure community acceptance of his work. As Kramer has pointed out, although Ahearn lived in the South Bronx, he was not *from* the

³⁸⁵ Kwon, 135.

community. Much of the fall out from Ahearn's statues and their immediate removal relates back to the artist's outsider status: a middle-class, white artist from Binghamton New York who chose to settle in South Bronx. In *Whose Art Is It?* Kramer quotes a young woman, Angela, who was born and raised in the South Bronx as having referred to Ahearn's portrait-sculptures as "totems of racism."³⁸⁶ Angela described why the sculptures were so offensive saying, "John [Ahearn] had *chosen* the South Bronx... John had choices—which was the one thing that most of the people here don't have."³⁸⁷ Perhaps had Ahearn collaborated with Torres, who was actually *from* the neighborhood (and representative of its racial and cultural make-up), on the Percent for Art project, the outcome would have been different.

In terms of the case studies examined in this thesis, Dennis Adams's project exemplifies why it is risky to commission an artist who has no connection to the school or neighborhood and who expressed no desire to work with the community. Like Spiegelman, Adams was not in the Percent for Art Registry at the time he was asked to compete for a PAPS commission. However, unlike Spiegelman who was approached because of his specific connection to the school site, Adams was tapped to make a proposal in front of the artist selection panel because he was "hot at that moment."³⁸⁸ His project illustrates how the disconnect between "Art" and the community is aggravated (not alleviated) when a project is imposed on a public site and not integrally woven into the fabric of the community.

³⁸⁶ Kramer, 109.

³⁸⁷ Ibid.

³⁸⁸ Dennis Adams interview with the author (12 February 2010),

Because PAPS selected Adams for this commission in spite of his reticence to adapt his studio practice to meet the unique requirements of public art intended for public school scenario, *Tributaries* falls flat in terms of its overall impact on the community of Long Island City High School. Adams is not to blame for this, PAPS is. Although Adams did say during the artist selection panel that his project would “develop out of the site,” he was describing the physical site of the school, not a willingness to work with the community.³⁸⁹ While it may be tempting to invite well-known artists to participate in public art projects, it should be PAPS’s purview to select artists who will strive to create work in the public realm with the goal of involving, or at least appealing to, the community-based audience. Without a doubt, public artists confront a difficult task in trying to address the declared needs of those with whom they are expected to work, which is why it is in PAPS’s best interest to carefully screen for artists who possess the rare qualities of being “visionaries with humility,” not to mention flexibility.³⁹⁰

In addition to advertising the program and registry to a wider variety of artists and judiciously vetting the artists in the running for a commission, PAPS should do a better job of preparing the artists for the unique experience of working on a permanent site-specific commission for a school. Many artists who take on PAPS commissions complain that they were not primed for the length of the project, the number of meetings and requests for re-designs, the legalities of the PAPS contract, and the requirements in terms materials and fabrication. Since it is not an option to separate bureaucracy from

³⁸⁹ “Minutes from Artist Selection Panel Meeting: West Queens High School” New York City Department of Cultural Affairs (4 February 1991).

³⁹⁰ Thomas Hine, “The Art of Identity,” in *New Land Marks: Public art, community, and the meaning of place* edited by Penny Balkin Bach (Philadelphia, PA: Editions Ariel, 2001): 41.

government-sponsored initiatives, it is essential that PAPS provide as much information up front as possible about what the commission actually entails in terms of time-commitment and responsibility. At the outset of every competition, PAPS should provide the artist-finalists with the following information gathered together in a clear and concise manner:

- 1-A project description that lays out the nature of the school construction project and the scope of the artist's services
- 2-A list of any predetermined goals that PAPS, the architect, or the community have already discussed.
- 3-Any existing plans for the site, including areas that have already been discussed as possible (or impossible) locations for art.
- 4-Background information on the school itself and/or the neighborhood community. (This could include census information or other statistics readily available to the DOE.)
- 5-A budget, including the breakdown of what percent will go to the artist as a design fee and a list of all of the expenses the budget is expected to cover (materials, fabrication, installation, lighting, conservation, etc.)
- 6-Project timeline. A realistic estimate for the project including a list of all meetings, presentations, and site visits that the artist will be required to attend.
- 7-Background on PAPS, such as examples of past PAPS projects and community feedback.
- 8-Contact information for the various point people involved in the project (PAPS, architect, school.)

Disseminating as much information about the specific nature of each project and the general PAPS guidelines at the outset of a commission would help make sure all of the parties involved are on the same page throughout the course of each PAPS project. As a rule, all movements towards democracy bring increased bureaucracy: this process, which aims to please a public audience, can be brutal on artists.³⁹¹ In order to help artists continue to be inventive and do their best work within the unavoidably stifling context of

³⁹¹ Lucy R. Lippard, "The Object of Process," in *New Land Marks* edited by Penny Balkin Bach (Philadelphia, PA: Editions Ariel, 2001): 53.

a bureaucratic and democratic system, it is essential to be as forthcoming with all information related to the process as possible.

On the other side of the equation, artists should be made aware well in advance that there will be certain necessary restrictions on the physical nature of commissions for the public realm. It is worth mentioning here that graduate-level courses and even entire departmental programs concerning public art are beginning to pop up at various American universities. In the spring/summer 2006 issue of the *Public Art Review* (which was dedicated to “Art on Campus”), editor Jack Becker noted a “proliferation of course offerings, degrees, and community-based educational programs” on the subject of public art.³⁹² One example is the “Art and Social Practice” graduate program that Harrell Fletcher helped to found at Portland State University in 2007. Speaking with Shelly Willis in an interview in 2007 about the physical realities of public Fletcher noted, “In the public art realm there are people stopping you at every turn. No, it can’t be done that way It has to be permanent. Permanent means fifty years You must make it out of these materials. It can’t be dangerous.”³⁹³ Precisely because of the disconnect between the expectations of public art administrators versus the preparedness (or lack there of) on the part of artists competing for public art commissions, the Art and Social Practice Art graduate program will teach students how to navigate the process of applying for Percent for Art projects and learn about the requirements for installation and fabrication if selected.³⁹⁴ Educating artists about the public art system is certainly a step towards

³⁹² Jack Becker, “The Big Bang of Intelligent Design,” *Public Art Review*, issue 34 (Spring/Summer 2006): 7.

³⁹³ Cartiere and Willis, 127.

³⁹⁴ Ibid.

creating better, more effective, paths of communication between artists, art administrators, fabricators, and installers.

PANELS: COMMUNITY REPRESENTATION & PARTICIPATION:

PAPS relies on a panel of deputized representatives as a means of integrating art into the community. However, there are problems with the current system wherein a select few represent a large and diverse population. If the ultimate goal for a public artwork is to reach an entire community, it must be pointed out that a panel comprised of less than ten individuals can never truly speak for “the people.” As the artist collective Critical Art Ensemble has explained,

The bureaucratic experts from the selected institution will represent the community and tailor the project to their specifications in a negotiation that also accounts for the desires of the artist. When the process is over, who has actually spoken? Since the majority of the negotiation over *policy* is not done with individuals in the territory, but with those who claim to represent it, which is again shaped by the bureaucratic parameters placed on the project by the money donors, how much direct autonomous action is left? How much dialogue has taken place? Not much. What is left is the representation of a representation (the bureaucratic opinion of the artists and h/is mediators.)³⁹⁵

According to CAE, “Artworks which depend on bureaucracy in order to come to fruition (i.e. institutionally sanctioned public art including community-based art) are too well managed to have any contestational power.³⁹⁶ In the end, art-by-committee commissions are acts of compliance that only reaffirm hierarchy and the rational order.”³⁹⁷ Even

³⁹⁵ Critical Art Ensemble, *Electronic Civil Disobedience and Other Unpopular Ideas* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 1996): 43-44.

³⁹⁶ Ibid.

³⁹⁷ Ibid.

though PAPS panels are designed to account for a variety of perspectives related to the site for a public artwork, in truth each panel is a contrived political body whose decisions are removed from the realities of the site instead of entrenched in them. It would make sense for PAPS to take a more grassroots approach to developing artworks for schools.

One way to reach out to the community directly would be to discuss Percent for Art commissions in an open forum/town hall-style meeting held at a community center near the school site (or at the school itself in the case of an expansion project). Rather than taking community members out of their neighborhood and discussing art for the school in the Percent for Art office at City Hall, the public art administrators could travel into the communities and initiate discussions about art work for the schools on the school's home turf. Not only would an open forum enable more community participation in deciding which artists to commission (it would be open to any one who is interested in attending as opposed to the panelists who are individually tapped to participate), but it would also provide an opportunity to educate communities about public art. Administrators would benefit from hearing an even wider range of opinions and the public would benefit by learning about the commissioning process and the goals of the PAPS program in general.

If the panel system is to be continued, it needs to be improved. It is imperative that the panelists be better educated before being asked to make decisions related to artist selection and design approvals for public art. Looking at slides of previous works does not give the panelists enough relevant information in order to decide what artist might be best suited for a particular public school commission. Shelly Willis has pointed out that "...it is nearly impossible to really understand an artist's work by reviewing it under

these circumstances.”³⁹⁸ Not only does the slide show not relate a full representation of an artist’s capabilities, but also the non-arts professionals on the panel may not even know what to look for in the slides or how to interpret what they are being shown towards making a decision for an art commission. Art critical and/or visually descriptive language can be intimidating to panelists who are not accustomed to looking at and discussing art. It is irresponsible to thrust uneducated panelists into the position of selecting an artist, but as Willis accurately points out: “Public art administrators rarely, if ever, have the time to offer even the most basic of primers before these [artist selection] committees begin their work.”³⁹⁹ Making the art-by-committee process truly democratic is contingent upon educating the panelists so that they can feel comfortable and confident selecting artists and critiquing design proposals.

CONTRACTS:

The PAPS contract is a lengthy legal document that is intimidating and unfamiliar to many of the artists who receive commissions. It is currently unintelligible (too legalistic and unnecessarily complicated) to a layman. As Art Spiegelman noted, “I would need to hire a lawyer to read through the contract in order to make sense of it and that would cost as much as my entire design fee.”⁴⁰⁰ The College Art Association (CAA) does recommend that artists who accept public art commissions bring their contracts to a

³⁹⁸ Willis “Investigating the Public Art System” in Cartiere and Willis eds., 154.

³⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁰ Art Spiegelman interview with the author (8 March 2010).

lawyer, advising that “artists should not attempt to act as their own attorney.”⁴⁰¹ CAA’s current “Standards and Guidelines” for public art note that,

Many artists believe that they have no alternative but to sign the agreement in the form presented to them. But this is not the case; most agreements are subject to negotiation and change. The committee urges artists to consult a lawyer and, if possible, to have the lawyer prepare a contract.⁴⁰²

However, because lawyers are prohibitively expensive and would only add another layer of paperwork to an already heavily bureaucratic process, it would be better if PAPS would streamline the contract and make it easier to parse so that all parties involved have a good understanding of their responsibilities and feel confident that they can enter into a working relationship with a positive mindset. As has been mentioned earlier in this thesis, the conditions for taking on a commission for the City of New York are quite a shock to many artists—unlike anything they have to abide by in their normal artistic practice. Perhaps through a partnership with an organization such as “Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts,” PAPS could reformulate their contract into a legal document that addresses all of the concerns related to a City-funded commission but in a manner that is more easily understood by laymen.⁴⁰³ At the very least, PAPS-commissioned artists should be advised to take their contracts to VLA for review.

⁴⁰¹ College Art Association “Standards and Guidelines”
<<http://www.collegeart.org/guidelines/publicwork.htm>> (accessed 15 April 2010).

⁴⁰² Ibid.

⁴⁰³ VLA’s Legal Services program is the central focus of our activities and resources. The program includes a wide range of services including: the *Art Law Line*, a legal hotline; the VLA Legal Clinic for VLA members; in-house appointments with VLA staff attorneys; and pro bono placements for low-income artists and nonprofit arts organizations with one of over 1,200 volunteer attorneys.
(<http://www.vlany.org/legalservices/index.php>)

In addition to its length and difficult language, there are several ideological problems with the current PAPS contract. First of all, the contract holds the artist liable for damages and injury related to the fabrication and installation of the artwork up until the moment the final artwork is unveiled and officially taken over by the school. This is not something that applies to artwork made for a museum, gallery, or private collection. It is unfair to hold the artist responsible for the safe production and installation of artwork. Of course large-scale site-specific installations have a greater potential to be dangerous to those involved in the fabrication and/or installation, but for the most part, PAPS artists are not prepared to safely manage production and installation procedures. PAPS administrators, on the other hand, have great experience and are well versed in what it takes to safely produce and install artwork in a school and should therefore be held legally responsible. PAPS is better equipped to answer questions and make decisions based on safety. In an ideal situation, the artist would enter into a contract with PAPS that specifies that the artist will have to abide by standardized safety regulations designed and implemented by PAPS and based on adherence to safety codes, PAPS will assume liability related to fabrication and installation of the artwork.

The PAPS contract also holds the artist responsible for hiring out subcontractors to make design drawings based on their sketches and/or to fabricate the artwork. Again, since the artists usually have not worked a large-scale permanent installation before, they may not be well equipped to manage these crucial aspects of the project. PAPS should have dedicated artist liaisons that would work directly with the artist to translate their designs into workable structural schematics and then coordinate production with pre-approved fabricators. Having an artist liaison would make it possible for PAPS to take

on the responsibility of creating safe and sound artworks and would also give PAPS more control over issues related to the fabrication and installation of the artwork.

Another fundamental problem with the current PAPS contract is that it requires that all drawings and sketches related to the final artwork becomes their property. While it makes sense that the City should own the final artwork, it is unfair to ask artists to turn over their original designs and sketches. For many artists their livelihood is based on their ability to sell and exhibit their drawings and/or maquettes. Therefore, it is unfair for PAPS to require that all original artwork related to the final school installation be turned over. For the purposes of archives and reference, copies or digital files related to the progression of PAPS artworks through to the final design should suffice.

Finally, with regard to the contract, PAPS needs to do more to protect the interest of the artists who accept to create artwork for a public school. In the case of Carrie Mae Weems's commission, PAPS did not advocate enough for her rights or on behalf of the creative integrity of her work and, as a result, Walton was robbed of a potentially great artwork. Although the current contract does outline terms by which the artist may get out of a commission based on whether the final situation adheres to the "conformity with the approved final design and scope of the work," it should be PAPS's prerogative to protect the artist from this type of situation. The contract should be redesigned to have the interests of the artist (and the artwork) at the core, so that when problems arise it does not become a case where the artist is forced to seek legal action against PAPS.

Admittedly, PAPS in a difficult situation because they are part of the School Construction Authority, and therefore beholden to decisions made by the top administration, which do not necessarily have the best interest of art at heart.

Nevertheless, if the PAPS program is to be an effectual promoter of successful public art projects their office needs to have the autonomy to make decisions that will protect the artists and the artworks from damages related to the non-compliance of the SCA to their original plans. Returning to the case of Walton High School for a moment, it appears that the construction of a new pool is again underway, and in this case PAPS should lobby for *Mind, Health, Spirit and Body* to be relocated to its intended and rightful location.

Compromised artworks do not benefit the community or the artist and therefore should not be tolerated by the PAPS administrators.

MATERIALS:

Because PAPS mandates that the artworks it commissions be permanent, it is essential that issues related to maintenance be addressed from the very initial stages of every commission. As was illustrated by *Mnemonics*, artworks created in a school environment are vulnerable to damages. In this case, the school and PAPS were repeatedly financially taxed by the need for repair work to the glass cubes. With funding for arts initiatives always in peril, it is shameful to have to spend rare and valuable funds to maintain just one particular project. It is in everyone's best interest if PAPS would do more to discourage the use of artistic materials and techniques that are not durable and sustainable. PAPS staff have valuable first-hand knowledge of how certain materials stand up to time and general wear-and-tear in a school environment and they should advise artists based on this unique expertise. If careful consideration is given to the materials chosen for PAPS projects, it will be easier to manage the conservation and

restoration of the PAPS collection. The money and time saved can be allocated towards new projects instead of repairing and refabricating old ones time and time again.

Many artists who take on PAPS commissions are not used to working with the materials required for permanent large-scale public artworks. It can be an intimidating and frustrating process for an artist to test-out and source durable new mediums. For instance, Carrie Mae Weems had never worked in mosaic before and although the final fabrication turned out beautifully, researching the fabricator in Italy and requesting samples of the material was a time consuming and labor-intensive undertaking. In the case of *Tributaries*, the lexan panels that Adams came up with for the light boxes eventually turned green and had to be replaced. Perhaps had a different plastic material (something with an archival coating, perhaps) been used from the beginning, PAPS would not have had to re-fabricate the light boxes in 2009. In order to free artists from having to tackle new mediums as part of their PAPS experience and as a cost saving measure, it should be the purview of the PAPS administrators to advise artists which materials they should consider and provide information on fabricators.

An alternate potentially advantageous option would be for PAPS to predetermine a list of materials for artists to consider before coming up with their designs for a school site. The MTA's "Art In Transit program," for example, limits artists to a select few mediums that have been tested and work best for the particular setting of subway and bus stations. Artists who work on commissions for MTA stations are restricted to working in "mosaic, terra cotta, bronze, glass and mixed-media sculpture."⁴⁰⁴ Although this may hamper, to a certain extent, the type of artwork that artists will propose, it also ensures

⁴⁰⁴ MTA "Art in Transit" website <<http://www.mta.info/mta/aft/about/>> (accessed 1 April 2010).

that the final work will not become easily damaged or require an inordinate amount of maintenance. Since the after-life of a public artwork is an essential component of its overall success, it is essential that materials and maintenance requirements be given utmost consideration when planning future PAPS projects. Artist Juan Sanchez, who has worked on commissions for the MTA and PAPS said in 2010 that having the materials be predetermined was a “bit of a relief.”⁴⁰⁵

Another direction that PAPS may consider for future commissions involves moving towards artworks that are not necessarily physical objects. When speaking with Dennis Adams in 2010 about his ideal scenario for working with students and art, he suggested taking the money allocated for a permanent art object and using it instead to create a meaningful experience for the students. In Adams’s own words:

A great thing would be to take the Percent For Art money and create a truly public moment for the students. I would draw them into the process and produce a temporary project that might or might not have a permanent residue. The students could publish a book or create some other public platform that would document a larger process of collaboration. For me something like that would be a really transformative moment in the relationship between the artist and the educational system. Why does the art have to be tied to the physical place—the school’s architecture—why does it have to be inscribed in bricks and mortar? That’s so old fashioned. The artist could share his whole vision with the students. I’ve tried proposing temporary interactive projects for permanent projects and they are always rejected.⁴⁰⁶

Suzanne Lacy, writing over ten years after her seminal *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (1995), validates Adams’s expressed desire to free public art from materiality.

Lacy explains, “Connections to materiality in public art have continued to decay.

⁴⁰⁵ Juan Sanchez (artist) interview with the author (11 March 2010).

⁴⁰⁶ Dennis Adams interview with the author (12 February 2010)

Ephemeral and publicly located processes have become a new ‘materiality.’ It is process art, solidly grounded in expressive and analytic practice, but the materiality is that of life itself rather than a metaphor for life.”⁴⁰⁷ Relational Aesthetics and object-less conceptual art have already been established as viable contemporary artistic practices and it will be interesting to see whether this model can be translated effectively to public art. In fact a few existing public art programs such as the Visual and Public Art Program (VPA), which Lacy co-founded with fellow artist Judith F. Baca in 1997 at the California State University at Monterey Bay, are leading the way by supporting a redefinition of art as a social practice.⁴⁰⁸ VPA represents an innovative program, which pursues a community-based public art model that upholds that “imagining the work of the artists as a space of agency and promise towards the well being of a community is a positive and liberatory stance.”⁴⁰⁹ PAPS should consider the benefits of “liberating” its output from object-based practice and perhaps test out projects modeled after the VPA program.

PLACEMENT:

In addition to insuring that materials are sturdy and archival, site-specificity is an important factor to consider for all PAPS projects. One of the reasons why *Mnemonics* suffered damage is because the artwork was spread out all over the school. The individual glass cubes were installed in isolated pockets of the building such as stairwells, hallways, the gymnasium, and locker rooms, which made it easier for covert acts of vandalism to occur and for the damages to remain undetected for long periods of time.

⁴⁰⁷ Suzanne Lacy, “Time in Place” in Cartiere and Willis, eds., 31.

⁴⁰⁸ Stephanie Anne Johnson, “Toward a Celebratory and Liberating System of Teaching Public Art” in Cartiere and Willis, eds., 101.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid.

There are over 400 glass bricks interspersed throughout Stuyvesant High School, which makes *Mnemonics* a very difficult artwork to monitor and care for. (Even just doing condition reports for this particular artwork creates several full days of work for PAPS project managers.) When working on a later project for PAPS at PS 102 in the Bronx, Jones and Ginzel again decided to use glass bricks. Similar in style to *Mnemonics*, the PS 102 project *Encyclic* (2004), uses the same glass bricks as reliquaries and also incorporates the artwork into the structure of the school building. In the case of *Encyclic*, however, the artists decided to confine the glass bricks to one prominent location. The effect of having artifacts enshrined in glass (for *Encyclic* the artists collected various orbs to fill the glass bricks) is similar to *Mnemonics*, but the impact is more obvious and the artwork is less vulnerable. *Encyclic* is more easily recognizable as an artwork in that it is a large, unified piece. Its central location in the school's lobby makes it less vulnerable to vandalism. It is easier for the school to care for this piece, easier for PAPS to do condition reports, and easier for the community to access as an artistic concept.

Similar in spirit to the suggestion that PAPS limit the materials an artist can consider using, it might also be beneficial to the outcome of the final artworks if PAPS were to predetermine locations for art within each school before the artist is on board. PAPS currently aims to foster a creative collaboration between the architect and artist in a Bauhaus-style union of function and design (“The Percent for Art program encourages dialogue between architects and artists and a mutual aesthetic understanding that can lead to more holistic collaborations”), but in reality many of the problems that arise during the process of realizing PAPS projects relate to the contention between artists, architects, and

the general contractors.⁴¹⁰ Leading up to the founding of PAPS (1989), in late 1980s there was a movement towards public art that was “useful,” meaning that it fits into the overall architectural design of the building.⁴¹¹ Artist such as Scott Burton designed benches, plazas, steps, gates, railings and other architectural elements were seen as natural hybrids of art and architecture and promoted in particular by government-sponsored public art programs. However, this type of public art is now looked back on rather negatively precisely because it blends “seamlessly into the context of urban development.”⁴¹² Not only can integrating art into architecture at such a fundamental level make art disappear, but with the exception of a few artists—Jones and Ginzel, notably—the majority of PAPS artist do not have a positive experience trying to work with the architect on integrating artwork into the structural design of the building.

As Michele Cohen noted in 2010, problems with PAPS projects often arose when “an architect was very resistant to sharing a conceptual space with an artist—not necessarily the physical space but allowing the artist to really become the co-designer in parts of the building.”⁴¹³ Speaking from the architect’s point of view, Robert Venturi, who has been an influential practitioner and theoretician of architecture and urban planning in the U.S. since the 1960s said in 2000, “When we think about public art, we should also consider architecture as a public art form.”⁴¹⁴ Venturi articulates here one of the fundamental rifts between architects and artists who are made to collaborate, which is that architects also see themselves as artists. They have their own ideas for how to relate

⁴¹⁰ Cohen, 226.

⁴¹¹ Finkelpearl, 34.

⁴¹² Ibid.

⁴¹³ Michele Cohen and Grace Ramirez-Gaston interview with the author (15 January 2010).

⁴¹⁴ Finkelpearl, 166.

to the community and how their design should function which can be distinct from the aesthetic visions of a selected public artist. This is not to say that artists and architects should not each have the opportunity to address the public, rather that the most effective and productive way of doing this is to let each do so on his own terms and not force a collaboration. Tom Finkelpearl points out that in the years leading up to the 1990s, “Artists had fought for the right to participate on ‘design teams’ on more equal terms with the architects. However, some artists began to feel that their vision was simply absorbed into the setting, in the name of interprofessional cooperation.”⁴¹⁵ In this way, the relationship between an architect and an artist working together on a project is similar to an arranged marriage, there are a lot of outside forces hoping that the union will be strong and meaningful, but in reality there is a great deal of resentment between the two parties. Rather than ignoring this problem, it would be in PAPS’s best interest to stop putting such a strong emphasis on integrating art into the architecture of the school.

Perhaps if PAPS abandoned the “design team” model in favor one wherein space would be reserved specifically for artwork in every new school, the stress of trying to integrate art into architecture would be eliminated and this would allow more focus to be placed on the design and realization of the artwork itself. The artist could still meet with the architect to decide on a location for the art, but the two parties would not have to think about integrating the art into the site structurally. As Barbara Goldstein wisely points out in her practical guide to public art “Public Art by the Book,” “When an artist can’t be selected early in the design process, it may be advisable to take a more traditional approach of incorporating art into architecture. In this scenario, when a

⁴¹⁵ Finkelpearl, 32.

project reaches the late schematic stage or the phase of design development, the lead designer identifies construction elements that might be enhanced by the work of one of more artists.”⁴¹⁶ Since the reality of PAPS commissions is that more often than not an architect will have been assigned to a school construction process long before there is an artist selection panel, reverting to an approach where the art is structurally autonomous from the school’s architecture seems the responsible thing to do for several reasons. First of all, artists might appreciate being kept out of conversations with architects, general contractors, and construction workers because this would allow them to focus more on the creative concepts of their commission. Secondly, by separating out the artwork from the overall construction of the building, the need for change orders—which are quite often the (expensive) results of trying to integrate artwork into a school building at a structural level—could be avoided. And lastly, an autonomous artwork has the potential to be more visible, and therefore more effective, than a work that is merely seen as an enhancement of the architecture. Having the artists come in after the architects have done their design work will allow the artists to react to the architecture and create a work that is in dialogue—if not in perfect harmony—with its surroundings.

The suggestion that the artist not be involved in the design stage does not signify a return to the problematic art-in-public-places model of public art. The most beneficial for PAPS would liberate the artist from having to think about how to physically integrate his/her work into the architecture of the school and encourage him/her to work with the community. By precluding the artist-architect collaboration, the artist is free to think about the site as a conceptual space in addition to a physical space. If art represents

⁴¹⁶ Barbara Goldstein, ed., *Public Art by the Book* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2005): 118.

another language in a school building (as Cohen has said, PAPS projects “can communicate what often remains unarticulated in a building’s program of requirements, enlivening and enriching the school environment with symbolic content.”) then it would benefit from being allowed to assert itself as such rather than disappearing into its site.⁴¹⁷ The next step forward for PAPS in promoting the social function of public art is to free the artists from having to contribute to the design of the school—enhancing the physical environment—so that they can focus on creating art that participates as part of the public sphere. Art that will have the greatest impact in a school environment should be recognizable as a unique and special facet of the physical environment. Architects should endeavor to create inspiring school buildings and PAPS artists should concentrate on delivering work that helps to create a unique situation, through its own symbolic language, within the social, political, and physical context of the school.

OWNERSHIP:

Ownership of PAPS projects is an issue that urgently needs to be readdressed by the PAPS program in conjunction with the New York City Department of Education. Currently there is not an effective means by which to adequately prepare a school to take control over an artwork and give it the attention and care it needs in order to make an impact on the community. As has been pointed out in each of the case studies, “Responsibility for a work of art does not end when it is erected. Indeed, that’s where it begins, and every work of public art needs a constituency of people who care about it.”⁴¹⁸ There are two aspects related to this concept of responsibility or “ownership,” which are

⁴¹⁷ Cohen, 9-10.

⁴¹⁸ Hine, in *New Land Marks* edited by Penny Balkin Bach, 41.

of equal importance. There is the issue of the day-to-day physical maintenance of PAPS projects. Once the artwork is unveiled, PAPS provides the school custodian with detailed information about how to care for the artwork and what to do if something gets broken or damaged. Maintenance, therefore, is the responsibility of the individual school and PAPS only enters back into the equation in the cases where restoration or refabrication is necessary (for example, with *Mnemonics* and *Tributaries*). However, in order to avoid extreme cases where artworks are damaged as a result of improper care or mistreatment part of PAPS's mission should be to insure that the schools are in fact taking care of the artwork. One way to do this would be to organize a yearly seminar on art conservation where attendance by at least one member from each school with a PAPS artwork is required to attend. Another option is to expand the PAPS staff so that it would be possible to do more frequent site visits to the school and address issues of maintenance, ideally before they become a major problem. In the long-term, conservation, education, and an increased presence of PAPS staff on-site at the schools would greatly reduce the need for repairs or re-fabrication.

The second issue related to ownership has to do with the school's psychological attachment to, and respect for, a PAPS artwork. As Miwon Kwon has pointed out in her discussion of new genre public art, artists working in communities who are hoping to make art more familiar and accessible rely on "ownership of [the] art...[as] the basis for the integration of art and everyday life and a powerful force toward social and political change."⁴¹⁹ Whether or not a school appreciates an artwork is largely dictated by whether or not the upper administration takes a serious interest in the role that a PAPS artwork

⁴¹⁹ Kwon, 107.

plays in the community of their school. In many cases, PAPS artworks suffer because the principal does not make it a priority to raise awareness about artwork in his or her school. According to PAPS Project Manager Grace Ramirez-Gaston there are clear tangible ways to measure whether or not a school is invested in the artwork bestowed onto their community. She explained in 2010 that when visiting a school, if “you see a mural is *not* covered with flyers, that says a lot about the leadership of that school.”⁴²⁰ It might seem like a small thing, but the fact that an artwork is acknowledged as being a special part of the school’s environment can boost its overall impact exponentially.

During site visits to the four schools discussed in this thesis I did not encounter any situations where PAPS artworks were covered by flyers or anything else, but I did notice instances of disinterest or lack of understanding on the part of the school, vis-à-vis the artwork entrusted into its custody. For example, when trying to set up a site visit to the Walton Educational Campus, I was passed around to multiple contacts and left numerous messages explaining my research and why I would like to visit the school. Finally, I was directed to the main office at the DOE where I spoke with Margie Feinberg who assured me that there was “protocol that must be followed when organizing visits to public schools.” I gave Ms. Feinberg all of my details, but never heard back. At this point I contacted Grace Ramirez-Gaston at PAPS to see if she could help gain me access to the school to see Weems’s mosaics in person. Ramirez-Gaston, the Program Director for PAPS, fared no better in trying to reach someone at the school who would agree to escort us to see the artwork. Finally, after a few weeks of unreturned phone calls, Ramirez-Gaston and I decided to drive up to the school for a “surprise” visit. When we

⁴²⁰ Michele Cohen and Grace Ramirez-Gaston interview with the author (15 January 2010).

got there, there was a lot of confusion about who we were and what we wanted to see. Finally the school custodian, Glenn Habel came to meet us and agreed to show us the art. I described the mosaics to Mr. Habel and explained that they were in the gym. He asked which gym I meant and, not having realized that there would be more than one gym in the school, I did not know. Together, we visited three gyms at the Walton Educational Complex before we found *Health, Body, Mind, Spirit*. This may be an extreme case of disorganization and lack of information regarding a particular PAPS project, but it illustrates how artworks can be forgotten and slighted once they are handed over to the schools.

Some artworks, *Mnemonics* and *Sound Carnival* for example, require more than a tacit acknowledgment of their existence in order to live up to their full artistic potential. Many works created through PAPS are dependent on consistent participation on the part of the community and therefore require that the school be integrally involved in maintaining and using the artwork. In these situations PAPS has been unable to assure that the artworks live up to their good intentions. There is currently no standard procedure for how to make sure that a school will follow through on activities such as filling the glass bricks at Stuyvesant or using the Buchens's guidebooks to do sound experiments using *Sound Carnival*. Unfortunately, the responsibility for maintaining the momentum of PAPS projects is a grey area that falls somewhere between the PAPS administrators and the school principal. In order to rectify this situation there needs to be a clear delineation of where PAPS's responsibility to an artwork ends and where the school's responsibility begins. The wide collaboration and high level of involvement on the part of art administrators and school officials and staff afforded to PAPS commissions

in terms of artist selection and design/concept approvals should be extended to afterlife of every artwork.

It should be a requirement that school principals meet with PAPS administrators to design an effective support system for maintaining the community's involvement with the art. It is a great waste of time, money and resources to keep commissioning artworks for schools if there is not infrastructure to relate them to the community. Events like the teacher training session that was organized at Long Island City High School or the seminars at Stuyvesant High School to introduce (and re-introduce the artwork) are important initiatives, but in most cases are grassroots-based and not standard protocol. Moving forward, it would be tremendously valuable if the schools could nominate a point person on-site who will manage the artwork. This could be an art teacher, assistant principal, librarian or any other school staff-member who values the artwork in schools. If the artwork requires active participation (*Mnemonics*, *Sound Carnival*), it would be that person's responsibility to make sure that the school community is doing its part to make the artwork as successful as possible. Another alternative would be to assign a part-time PAPS-liaison to each school who would organize one or two workshops related to the artwork per year. Since school budgets are extremely tight at the moment, perhaps funding for this PAPS-based position could come out of the Percent for Art allocation for each new commission. It is also a possibility to look to private organizations such as Studio in a School for help funding programming that would support the "ownership" of PAPS artworks by the schools and the community.⁴²¹

⁴²¹ Since 1977, Studio in a School has enriched over 600,000 children's lives in New York City's five boroughs with the creativity of the visual arts. STUDIO's unique method brings professional artists into school and community organizations to lead classes in

If the goal of PAPS artworks is to engage the audience, than it must be made clear that this does not happen automatically. An audience does not develop spontaneously when an artwork is thrust into its midst. It is unfair and unrealistic to expect that simply because an artwork exists in a school that it will be noticed, appreciated, or have any impact whatsoever. If it is not a priority to educate the public about the artwork and to take care of it, there is not much point to spending money, time, and effort making these public projects. *Mnemonics* shows very clearly the damaging negative impacts a school's failure to embrace the artwork can have. This is evidenced by the fact that a commemorative plaque was installed over an existing artwork and can also be measured by the number of cubes that remain empty after each class graduates. Not every PAPS artwork will have such obvious indicators of neglect, but this does not mean that they are attended to, in the larger sense that they are successfully integrated into the daily life of the school. The issue of how to effectively entrust artwork into the community is something that every PAPS project faces and is an issue that needs to be addressed well before a school welcomes an artwork into their community and under their care.

Another reason why there needs to be an institutionalized system designed to keep schools invested in the artwork (and to hold someone—or some agency—accountable when this does not occur) is because there is a high turnover at schools. Not only is the school's primary community—the students—constantly in flux, but the teachers and staff also come and go with great regularity. Many times when a principal leaves a school, the information and history about a PAPS art project goes with him or her. To insure that a

drawing, printmaking, painting, and sculpting, and work with teachers to link art with other academic subjects. < http://www.studioinaschool.org/about_history.php> (accessed 15 April 2010).

PAPS project does not suffer when staff and/or teachers move on from the school, there need to be regular training sessions for new principals and teachers that reintroduce the community to the artwork in their school and encourage new generations to appreciate and learn from the artworks. For instance, when Patricia Glunt retires from Long Island City High School (which she plans to do at the end of the 2010 school year), who will step in as an on-site expert about how *Tributaries* came to be and what it means?

Despite the dire situation facing New York City public schools in terms of budget cuts—are currently a lot of great efforts being made to improve art education. Making sure that schools make use of the site-specific artworks housed in their facilities should be part of this campaign. For example, in 2007 the New York City Department of Education put out a “Blueprint for Teaching Learning in Visual Arts.” This manual is intended to help teachers and administrators incorporate art into the curriculums of public schools. The “Blueprint” is a promising tool, “the result of an exceptional collaboration between educators from the school system and representatives from the arts and cultural community of New York City.”⁴²² It is intended to motivate “students to go beyond the walls of the classroom, and encourages them to take advantage of the rich resources available across New York City in museums, concert venues, galleries, performance spaces, and theaters”⁴²³ While it is terrific that the DOE is encouraging schools to take students out of the classroom and experience all of the art that New York City has to offer, it is a shame that this “Blueprint” does not even mention PAPS projects as a

⁴²² “Visual Art Blueprint 2007,” New York City Department of Education <<http://schools.nyc.gov/Offices/TeachLearn/Arts/blueprint.html>> (accessed 14 April 2010).

⁴²³ Ibid.

potential resource even though there are over 1,500 artworks in the DOE's own collection.

TO TEACH OR NOT TO TEACH:

The function of the arts in education is a perennial issue and there are many theories—some harmonious, some discordant—about how to best integrate art into the school environment (physically and contextually.) Although there may never be a consensus about what role art should play in a school environment, there are projects that will lend themselves naturally to certain types of art education and it is useful to prepare schools for how to incorporate PAPS projects into their community. Dating back at least as far as the 1830s, when the first true public schools (common schools, as they were called at the time) emerged in America, there has been consistent ideological support for having art in schools.⁴²⁴ What everyone seems to agree on is that the arts are good for education, but what exactly they help achieve and how is still debated.⁴²⁵ Based on the wide variety of ways in which it has been suggested that art can have a positive impact on students and the school environment—from Eisner's "Integrated Arts" theory to studies that show that looking at art stimulates the brain and increases the "capacity of the central nervous system to take in and process information about environmental events"—it should be PAPS's responsibility to suggest which methods of integrating art into the community

⁴²⁴ Arthur Efland. "Excellence in Education: The Role of the Arts." *Theory into Practice*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (Autumn, 1984): 267.

⁴²⁵ Efland. "Excellence in Education," 268.

make the most sense and are the most financially plausible.⁴²⁶ Shelly Willis has pointed out the depressing lack of educational programming related to public art:

It is standard for museums to spend twenty to thirty percent of an exhibition's installation budget (in addition to already-funded education program) on education programs for the public. Yet for most public art programs, anything budgeted for education rarely covers the printing and mailings of postcards announcing the artwork.⁴²⁷

When talking about artwork that is intended for a school—an educational facility equipped with educators, classrooms and a captive audience—it might seem like the didactic elements of said artwork would emerge organically. However, as has been evidenced by the case studies addressed in this thesis, this is almost never the case. The lack of art education in New York City public schools is something that PAPS should try to address and ultimately improve, but at the very least recognize, when working with the school community to develop a permanent artwork for the facility.

According to Arthur Efland, “the arts have played a number of roles in education: support for industry, moral education, social cohesion, and therapy.” *Tributaries*, for instance, spurred much discussion about what the role of an artwork dealing with political and historic subject matter should be at a high school. After it became clear that the school was equipped to embrace the artwork without coaching and explanation, PAPS stepped in and organized a teacher training session. The goal of this session was to inspire the school’s faculty to incorporate Adams’s artwork into classroom studies base on its subject matter. This model is what Elliot Eisner describes as “integrated arts” where in art is “used to help students understand a particular historical period or

⁴²⁶ Ibid., 270.

⁴²⁷ Cartiere and Willis, eds., 159

culture.”⁴²⁸ This was a well-intended initiative that should be repeated when similar art projects are proposed in the future. It should be noted, however, that in order for “integrated arts” model to be effective, the school would need to cultivate an expectation that teachers should use works, like *Tributaries*, as a resource to stimulate class room discussions about issues related to the subject matter of the artwork.

Another way in which the arts enhance education is by “refining our sensory system and cultivating our imaginative abilities.”⁴²⁹ An example of a PAPS artwork that would greatly benefit from this approach is *Sound Carnival*. There is much to be gained from art that encourages imagination as it relates to play, especially when creating artwork for younger children (pre-K through elementary school.) It is an inspiring idea to use art as means to help children “perceive things, not merely to recognize them” and *Sound Carnival* provides the raw material for precisely this kind of investigation.⁴³⁰ However, as has been noted, if the students are not introduced (and re-introduced) to the artwork and encouraged to explore it on their own, it is likely that *Sound Carnival* will not be an effective learning tool. Again, it is up to the school’s administration to emphasize the teaching potential of the artworks in their schools so that the community can get the most out of the PAPS program. Researchers at Columbia University have put forth the idea for an ideal arts-rich curriculum as one that “would enable arts teachers to collaborate with each other, with teachers from other disciplines, and with visiting artists,

⁴²⁸ Eisner, 39.

⁴²⁹ Ibid., 4.

⁴³⁰ Ibid., 5.

and other arts providers. This kind of curriculum requires careful planning.”⁴³¹ If changes are going to be made in terms of the way in which art is looked at and taught in school, this will require a restructuring of the entire educational system so that art is made a priority. This needs to come from the highest levels—the universities that produce teachers need to implement this change and the government guidelines for teaching need to change.⁴³²

It is interesting to note that at the same time that new genre public art emerged as a distinct trend in addressing community and site by involving the public more deeply, theories about how this type of art could benefit students were also being discussed. For example, as a means of democratizing art, in the late 1990s, art educators such as Ronald Neperud and Donald Krug advocated an approach to education that emphasized the community.⁴³³ New genre public art, which artist Suzanne Lacy distinguished from public art by “the level of engagement shared by the artist and the audience” offers a way to use art as a teaching tool.⁴³⁴ A perfect example of this would be *Mnemonics*. Ginzel and Jones sought to create a situation wherein the students of Stuyvesant would be collaborators on an artwork that would not be “complete” until the last cube was filled in 2080. Although this project has been plagued by problems related to vandalism and disinterest on the part of the school community, it still has the potential to be a great teaching tool for new genre public art education, which “situates students within the

⁴³¹ Judith Burton, Robert Horowitz and Hal Abeles. “Learning In and Through the Arts: Curriculum Implications.” In *Champion of Change: The Impact of Arts on Learning*, Edward Fiske, ed. (Washington, DC: Arts Education Partnership, 2000): 44.

⁴³² Graves, 143.

⁴³³ Gayle Green. “New Genre Public Art Education.” *Art Journal*. Vol. 58, No. 1 (Spring, 1999): 80.

⁴³⁴ Green, 80.

everyday concerns of community life.”⁴³⁵ With more institutional support from Stuyvesant, *Mnemonics* could foster a situation where art is used in a social situation to help students analyze contemporary culture (artifacts and mementos that will become the legacy of their graduating class), think about the processes of cataloging and archiving, and learn about the history of their school through blocks filled by past generations of Stuyvesant students. “New genre public art education challenges the ‘cliché of the pristine, socially removed art object’ by propelling schools into society and pedagogy into the political arena.”⁴³⁶ In order to make the most of the educational aspects of projects like *Mnemonics* (and prevent new genre public art from itself becoming a cliché) it is essential that PAPS and the DOE work together to support community-based learning through art.

Finally, the argument has been made that there is a cognitive function of having art in schools that is absorbed, rather than taught can help students “learn to notice the world.”⁴³⁷ According to Eisner, “The arts are typically crafted to make aesthetic forms of experience possible. Works of art do not ensure that such experience will emerge, but they increase the probability that it will as long as those in their presence are inclined to experience such work with respect to their aesthetic features.”⁴³⁸ It is with this in mind that traditional art forms in schools, like mosaics, stained-glass windows, or murals are most likely to have an effect on students. These types of non-participatory artworks (like *Tributaries* or *Mind, Body, Health, Spirit*) represent what Eisner refers to in his art educational theory as “expressive” objectives in that they provide a jumping-off point for

⁴³⁵ Green, 81.

⁴³⁶ Green, 83.

⁴³⁷ Eisner, 10.

⁴³⁸ Ibid.

a mutual (teacher and student) discovery where there is no educational outcome that can be predicted in advance.⁴³⁹ Still, if art is mistreated (as was the case with *Mind, Body, Health, Spirit*) the school is not providing an environment that is conducive to noticing artwork and thinking about its meaning or aesthetic value. Even in the cases where art is not used by teachers to illustrate a point or as an interactive experiment, it should be the responsibility of the school to teach students how to see. This requires that the artwork in the school be treated with respect and appreciation. As David Perkins notes in “The Intelligent Eye,” “looking at art requires thinking” and this particular mode of thinking should be made to be as easily accessible to the students as possible.⁴⁴⁰

OUTCOMES ASSESSMENTS:

The PAPS program suffers from being a closed circuit operation. As of yet, there has not been an opportunity to step back and reflect upon the work that the program has commissioned and whether or not it is the most effective and efficient use of time, energy and money. The administrators working for Percent for Art and PAPS have ideas about what they consider to be a successful communal effort to realize a final artwork for a school, but there are no procedures in place to measure how the projects are received. This means that the same key players who are involved in each PAPS project—the PAPS administrators—are also the people who are deciding which projects are models of success. In order to have a well-rounded assessment of the program, it is essential to

⁴³⁹ Arthur Efland. “The Arts and the Creation of the Mind: Eisner’s Contributions to the Arts in Education.” *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (Winter 2004): 73.

⁴⁴⁰ Perkins, 5.

gather information from the diverse constituents who interact with the finished artworks on a daily basis.

Currently, there is no budget or infrastructure for PAPS staff to do field research to try and track the “success” of projects that have been implemented. The crucial next step for the PAPS program should be to implement a system by which the school communities’ response to PAPS artworks can be documented and interpolated. This could be done through a written survey, filled out by students and staff every few years. Another option would be to organize an open forum at the school where issues related to the artwork are addressed followed by a question and answer period. There are even ways in which technological advances could aid in this endeavor. For example, the current website for PAPS has information about all of the artworks that have been commissioned through the program. Michele Cohen mentioned in 2010 that one of her goals as PAPS’ Director was to develop the website into a tool that could be used by teachers and students as a way to access the art in their schools and also learn about projects at different locations. Cohen’s idea, which has yet to be realized, was to add video clips related to each of the artworks. The video clip could be an interview with the artist speaking about his/her work, or footage of the artwork being fabricated or installed, or in the case of an interactive work, such as *Sound Carnival* or *Mnemonics*, examples of community members participating in the artwork. This is an excellent and relatively inexpensive way for PAPS to disseminate information about the artwork to schools and beyond. The PAPS website should be augmented and relaunched as a vital resource for schools.

Because the reciprocal relationships between the artist(s), the sponsoring agency, and the community, is idealized as one of the great and unique qualities of public art, it is only fair that the reactions to PAPS artworks be given as much time and attention as is currently dedicated to issues related to commissions, design approvals, installations, and repair. If the goal of public art is meant to enhance community life, it seems only natural that the community should be encouraged and expected to enhance the life of public art.

* * *

Tom Finkelpearl has said, “The problem with learning from public art controversies is that they never appear in the same guise twice.”⁴⁴¹ While it may be true that there will never be another Richard Serra plunked down in plaza without community involvement and approval, there are certainly trends in public art that we have already, and will continue to, learn from. Since the 1950s, the model for public art has changed rather remarkably, progressing from art-in-architecture, to art-in-public-places, to site-specific art, to community-based art, to interactive new genre public art and beyond. Problems and solutions have arisen with new each style and developing the best methods for commissioning public artwork and integrating “Art” into “common” life is ongoing—necessarily constantly evolving. Although there have not been major controversies over specific PAPS projects, significant problems do come up time and again with regard to

⁴⁴¹ Finkelpearl, 59.

community participation, school involvement, “ownership,” art education, and maintenance. All of these issues can be traced back to a fundamental communication breakdown between those who commission PAPS artworks and those who receive them.

At a time when funding for public art and public education is alarmingly inadequate, it is vital that public art programs do more to prove their relevance and strength. For PAPS this will mean addressing and more fully embracing the collaborative efforts required to successfully make (and make successful) public art. The art-by-committee panels are a step in the right direction, but further democratization of the PAPS process is necessary. To aid in the progression towards a more democratic program and holistic understanding of public art, this thesis intends to highlight and harmonize the unique voices of the diverse representatives tasked with making public art in public schools “work.”⁴⁴² While it is true that a successful public artwork (one that “works”) represents a meaningful connection to the public, it is a misconception that the artist can achieve this feat alone. The in-depth chronologies comprising the four case studies in this thesis reveal each PAPS project to be far more complex than a solitary artist reaching out towards a vague notion of public interest.

PAPS delegates shared responsibility to a group of individuals who shape artwork and, ideally, should monitor its reception in public schools. However, the case studies from the 1990s reveal that PAPS did not always foster constructive communication between the disparate parties even though they were all ostensibly working towards the same goal. Except for a relatively few meetings over the course of several years (artist

⁴⁴² “Work” here refers to the broadest sense, which Adam Gopnik implied when he wrote, ““Even if a program works (in the narrowest sense that work gets made) does it work in the more significant sense that some connection has been made between the public and the artist?” (Heiferman, ed., 10-11)

selection panels, design reviews, community presentations, and unveilings), key players charged with determining the nature of the artwork for each school are rarely all together to discuss issues that inevitably come up during (and after) the art commissioning process. Five or six meetings over the course of three years is simply not enough face time to foster sympathetic and meaningful relationships between the individuals representing the various constituents concerned with artwork for a public school. If “Art” is to be fully integrated into “common-life,” it needs to be part of an everyday discussion, not relegated to special meetings that are too few and too far between.

A major criticism of democratically commissioned art, art-by-committee, is that the lowest common denominator is often times the default selection, resulting in compromised (i.e. uninteresting and unsuccessful) public art. When this is the case, it is usually symptomatic of a disconnect between the people voting on the panel. Instead of explaining their different points of view to each other, the panelist express their distinct needs through a vote whereby the overall least offensive artwork is selected. In order to avoid this predicament, it is essential that all of the parties involved in PAPS commissions come to understand each other’s perspective from the start and that everyone continue to talk and interact at all stages of the PAPS process. The administrators at Percent for Art and PAPS should help relate the school principals to the architects, the custodians to the community leaders, the art critics to the teachers and so on. All of these representatives play an active role in how public art is designed and received in New York City’s public schools, but they rarely share the same specific concerns and do not necessarily speak the same professional languages. For instance, a custodian’s comment that an artwork may be difficult to clean is as valid as the

architect's assessment that an artwork will interfere with the natural light coming from a skylight. And by the same token, a principal's hands-on experience with rowdy students in the school cafeteria should be taken under careful consideration when an artist proposes a sound-sculpture for that location. In other words, the realities of the site (the physical and social setting for artwork) need to be better integrated into the discussion of public artwork at every stage. To avoid tokenism and in order to open up real and meaningful debates about the role of public art in contemporary society, it is essential that the involved parties have better means of communication and a more global understanding of the PAPS mission beyond each of their personal needs and opinions.

In its relatively short existence, PAPS has commissioned a wide variety of artworks for New York City's public schools. As Michele Cohen noted in 2009, "No one creative process, theme, style, or format characterizes the art, but there are observable trends: a predilection toward functionality, an invitation to audience participation, including children as codesigners, and a mirroring of the ethnic diversity that distinguishes the public school system."⁴⁴³ Much can be learned from the past twenty years about which projects have potential, which fall flat, and why. The ability of the program to adapt to changes in new media and art-making practices, new architectural styles and building code stipulations for schools, and fluctuations in budgets, shows that PAPS is capable of further growth and improvement. The goal of this thesis has been to identify practical problems with PAPS projects; not to criticize the goals and achievements of the program, but rather to call to action arts administrators, DOE administrators, principals, teachers, community members, etc. to help make the PAPS

⁴⁴³ Cohen, 225.

program the best it can possibly be given the intrinsic constrictions of government bureaucracy, limited budgets, and under-staffing.

It is an especially timely moment to analyze the goals, achievements, and shortcomings of the PAPS program. Founding Director Michele Cohen left PAPS in 2009 after nearly twenty years at the helm. Cohen has yet to be replaced, and whoever takes over the job of running the PAPS program would do well to have a look back at the past two-decades of projects and use this valuable information as a means to improve current and future commissions. It bodes well for PAPS that the current political climate is welcoming to public art, certainly more so than when the program was founded in 1989, in the wake of *Tilted Arc*. At this moment, there is great support for the arts at the highest levels of the U.S. government. President Obama, widely considered an “avid arts supporter,” included an arts platform in his campaign for President and after taking office allocated \$50 million stimulus to the National Endowment for the Arts.⁴⁴⁴ The new Chairman of the NEA, Rocco Landesman, has breathed new life into the role of the arts in America giving the NEA program the slogan “Art Works.”⁴⁴⁵ This championing of the arts, coming from top administrators in Washington, echoes the WPA/FAP message from the 1930s (a period that saw an enormous boost in support for public art fostered by government sponsorship) and is a call to arms for contemporary public art programs to realize their full potential to reach “the people” on a daily basis.

⁴⁴⁴ Robin Pogrebin and Jo Craven McGinty, “For New Leader of the Arts Endowment, Lessons Learned from a Shaky Past.” *The New York Times* (July 22, 2009): C1
Robin Pogrebin, “Problems Persist, but Arts Advocates See Progress Under Obama.” *The New York Times* (March 24, 2009): C1.

⁴⁴⁵ Sheryl Gay Stolberg, “Mr. Broadway Storms Capitol Hill.” *The New York Times* (April 7, 2010): AR1

On a more local level, and one that directly affects the PAPS program, New York City is lucky to have a mayor who is dedicated to arts funding and also to improving art education in public schools. In 2004, three years after Bloomberg was elected Mayor, “the number of temporary public art installations around the city [had] more than doubled, to forty-nine pieces by thirty-eight different artists, the greatest number in two decades.”⁴⁴⁶ Bloomberg has been credited with revitalizing New York City’s Department of Cultural Affairs and “make City Hall friendly to the art world.”⁴⁴⁷ New York City’s current municipal administration’s commitment to improving the PAPS program was made clear when in 2009, when Michele Cohen’s tome *Public Art for Public Schools* was published, Bloomberg sent a copy out to every public school principal in New York City with a letter praising the “vital role that art plays in the education of our children, sparking their creativity and inspiring them to think and see in new ways.”⁴⁴⁸ PAPS may still have way to go before it can be said to truly work, but the outlook in 2010 as far as the role art should (and can) play in public life and the efforts of the current generation of arts administrators show promise that public art in the twenty-first-century will be known for more than merely its good intentions.

⁴⁴⁶ Steinhauser, B3.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁸ Michael Bloomberg, letter to New York City public school principals (3 April 2009)

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Mara Hoberman interview with Michele Cohen (founder of Public Art for Public Schools program and Director 1989 – 2009) and Grace Ramirez-Gaston (current Program Director, Public Art for Public Schools) January 15, 2010

MH: In your view, Michele, what is the role of a PAPS artwork—should it teach, should it inspire, should it please, should it raise questions? And based on art’s role what are the responsibilities of the artists who sign on for these projects?

MC: A successful work should fulfill all of these functions. That represents the rubric—all of the kinds of ways in which art can touch the schools. My conclusion about this is that the best and strongest [art]works interact in several ways, touching on several of those areas you mention. That said, I don’t think there is a single solution at all.

MH: Has the philosophy regarding how artwork should be incorporated into public schools changed since the PAPS program began? Have there been projects since 1989 [when PAPS was created] that have tested and changed the way in which PAPS approaches the process of selecting an artist and approving an artwork for a school?

MC: I would say that the way we’ve changed the most is in adapting to new media—to new kinds of materials as well as to new kinds of architectural possibilities. What has really had the biggest impact on art in schools is the changing standards for New York City public schools’ architecture. It’s not that the way people are responding to the [art]work [has changed], but more that [PAPS] is tremendously impacted by the architectural context that we work in. Changes to the program also have to do with changes in leadership. Certain people within SCA or within the DOE might have aesthetic views or expectations that are going to have some impact on the kind of projects that are [realized]. PAPS works fairly independently, but there is some oversight from other areas [of City government].

MH: In terms of welcoming new media into PAPS projects, would that be an example of an aesthetic trend which is tied into what is happening in contemporary art in general? But in terms of the philosophy of the program—the role art plays in schools—have you noticed any significant changes?

MC: I think since the beginning there was always a recognition that schools are special places with special kinds of audiences and that interactive public art is something that can be very effective within a school context. There’s always been a desire for art to serve a pedagogical mission because the goal of schools is to educate, but the debate about how to best teach students and what they should learn is ongoing. I think since the very beginning of the [PAPS] program we were committed to a more interactive approach. A perfect example would be *Sound Playground*—a very early project that we did with the Buchens. And now, for example, there is a recent project with Tony Oursler, which also draws on student interaction, but in a very different way. I don’t think that there’s been a real change in the overall philosophy, but changes [to the program] have occurred

because of several things: budgets, architectural standards, and new developments in the art world vis-à-vis new media.

MH: What are the greatest challenges you face (or have faced) in terms of realizing PAPS commissions—creatively, administratively and technically?

MC: The two areas I always found to be the most challenging were working with principals who were reluctant to embrace the particular design solution and, on the implementation side, negotiating the [art] installation and dealing with contractors, union issues and so on. And sometimes, even earlier on in the design phase, [it could be difficult] if an architect was very resistant to sharing a conceptual space with an artist—not necessarily the physical space but allowing the artist to really become the co-designer in parts of the building. Every project is unique and it is possible for all of these issues to happen in a single project—Grace, would you agree with that?

GRG: Yes, definitely. And to expand upon what you just said in terms of challenges, even the dialogue between PAPS and upper management regarding what the art allocation will be can be a struggle. It is hard to know when we can get those art allocation amounts so that we can even begin thinking about a project. Coordination and conflict resolution during final construction phase can be challenging.

MC: The variables are always shifting. Sometimes projects are more complicated because of one factor and sometimes because of another. And sometimes, frankly, we have a difficult artist and then we start thinking that we work for the artist instead of the artist working for us. We call those high maintenance artists!

MH: I am interested to know if PAPS does outcome assessments of the artworks after they have been installed? Grace had mentioned earlier that she does a lot of site visits and that it is important to have constant contact with the principal and custodian to be able to check in to see how things are holding up. What do you learn from these follow up visits?

MC: [Assessments] were always a goal of mine, and maybe an example of an objective that I didn't meet. I've often thought about how to try to have some sort of objective criteria, which is very hard to do, to understand what is really the impact of an artwork and can we even figure that out.

MH: That is one of my big questions with this paper, actually. And I don't know what the answer is either.

MC: Sometimes Grace or I would come back really excited after a field visit because a custodian would be so enthusiastic about an artwork or a particular teacher would be eager to talk [about the piece] and there are other times when you go to a school and the [PAPS] piece is totally ignored. It [can be] very anticlimactic and then we feel like why are we doing [these projects.] But the audience for art in a school is broad and it's not like we can [realistically] interview every student in the building. We are basing the

reception of the artwork on an interaction with a principal or security guard or a custodian. But, on the other hand, sometimes kids frequently astound us in that they can be so observant. Part of me came to believe that art has an impact in many ways and we won't always know the full extent.

MH: I am curious if sometimes when you do a site visit if you can just tell that an artwork is appreciated. For instance when I visited Stuyvesant High School as a student many years ago, I was struck by the way in which the art [*Mnemonics* 1992] is everywhere in the school. Even at the time it really seemed to me that it had an impact on the overall identity and feeling of the school.

MC: You would think that that project would be incredibly successful in many ways and it has in fact become a public art benchmark. A lot of projects are compared to [*Mnemonics*] and it inaugurated a new approach to doing art in the schools, particularly with how it fits into the building. But the interactive quality, which sounds wonderful in theory, in practice has been hard to implement. [That aspect of the piece] relies on a sense of institutional continuity and the school really being willing to take ownership of the art.

GRG: It is still to this day a problematic [piece.] The artists [Kristen Jones and Andrew Ginzel] and an unpaid assistant still visit that site often. Doing repairs, coming up with workshops, creating and maintaining website—it's a little challenging for them.

MH: It's interesting to me that you are thinking about the long-term success of a [PAPS] project based on issues such as whether or not it gets damaged, or whether the principal is aware of it or whether the custodian cares, but that you are also trying to assess whether or not an artwork actually means anything to the community. This last point seems like it would be very hard to measure.

GRG: It's not measurable, but there have been cases when I've come back from site visits very excited. In several schools I've noticed that the art teacher is conducting some kind of interaction using [PAPS] artwork. For example [when I visited] MS 131 on Hester Street, the teacher was talking about art and design and then she took the students to the main lobby to show them the piece [*Timeless Spirit* (1984) Seong Moy]. The teacher actually used that artwork to teach the history of Chinatown. In that case there was definitely a sense of ownership. The way I judge the site visit now is when you see a mural is not covered with flyers, that says a lot about the leadership of that school.

MC: Yes, that shows respect for the artwork and for its mission, which is to be seen. And, going back a little bit on this point, I wanted to add that because I did so much historical research [while writing the *Public Art for Public Schools* book] and because my training [is as an art historian], I really tried to learn from how schools were reacting to their existing artwork [which had been commissioned and installed in previous eras]. There were not a great many mediums—primarily you had murals, stained glass, and some sculpture up until the post-war period at which point you get more variety. I learned a lot from investigating how schools view art that has remained in their care from the earlier periods.

I was interested in whether there were certain subjects that seemed to make sense to the schools? For instance, with regard to Abstraction – was that problematic or was that above controversy? I was really surprised to learn about the Hans Hofmann—no one within the school system seemed to really object to it, but no one seemed to really embrace it either—it just happened. In the end of course it was embraced, but during the course of commissioning this work the Art Commission rejected it! But there was really nothing that I could find in all of my research that reflected individual reactions, such as what the school principal said about an abstract mural.

Over the years we [PAPS] have gotten all kinds of comments from principals. Sometimes I am so surprised when a principal likes something that I don't expect him or her to like.

MH: I'd be interested to hear if there are any typical reactions that you have heard time and time again from any of the specific constituents involved in a typical PAPS project—principals, community members, architects, and so on. Are their reactions predictable? Does the architect always take a certain angle, for example? Are you confronting the same issues with the various parties for each project or is it totally different depending on the nature of each specific proposal?

MC: It's not always predictable. Sometimes you have extremely adventurous principals who are artistically adventurous and will embrace something that you think might even be too unconventional. And then you have principals who want something much more traditional—something that is obvious; a clear icon of education. I think what we've actually discovered is that there is no formula.

Sometimes I would go into a project thinking one thing and then would be really surprised by what I was hearing from the educators. And the thing about architects is that sometimes they profess to be receptive to artistic collaboration, but in reality they're not.

MH: Is that because of what you were saying earlier about not wanting to share?

MC: Exactly, because the building is their artwork. I've had architects who have gone so far as to call an artwork a desecration.

GRG: Certain projects require a tremendous amount of coordination and interface between the artist, the architect, and general contractor to make sure that they are all on the same page and working together.

MC: The panel that commissions the art and then those of us who eventually work with the artists are very thoughtful and are always asking questions not only about design of a piece but also about safety, security, maintenance, and all those issues. But then often times another City agency will get involved and it's almost like you are starting over again—they come in asking the same questions and we need to backtrack.

MH: In light of what you just said, because there are so many parties involved and so many levels of approval—are there any ways in which you think the PAPS program could be improved? The paths of communication and approval, for example?

MC: That is actually something that has changed a lot. It started changing before I left so I can't attribute it to the fact that it was because I was no longer the program director. I think that there is a saturation point—you want to reach a consensus decision when commissioning the art, but you can't have a hundred people involved in the decision-making process. In order to effectively manage a project as the design develops there are certain key players that need to be engaged, but it gets a lot more complicated and becomes really inefficient when you start going all the way up the ladder and tacking on more and more levels of review. I believe that this method does not strengthen the program.

MH: It seems like this type of intense scrutiny and oversight comes out of nervousness, which is strange because either you should trust the people that you put in charge of making these decisions about art in schools or it won't work for all the reasons you just mentioned.

MC: When I was hired there was a tremendous amount of confidence in the decisions I would make. Also there was so much else happening with the development of the entire agency [SCA] that the art was really just a tiny part of what was going on. It all has to do with the political climate and it very much has to do with the person at the top feeling confident that the group managing this aspect of school design is making the right decisions. The second-guessing is not just happening in the realm of art, however, it is also happening in other aspects of school design. I feel now that there is too much oversight in general.

MH: It sounds like it is quite paralyzing and that you can't really move forward.

MC: I don't believe that the projects are coming out stronger because of the additional levels of oversight and approval. I think it is unnecessarily complicating things. But I don't know that there is a good way around it. It means trying to satisfy everybody and it makes [the Program Manager's job] way harder.

MH: What, in your experience, are the typical reactions of artists who go through the process of creating a % project. Is it generally a positive experience for them? Or are they often frustrated?

MC: It is different for every artist as you can well imagine. Some artists walk away feeling that they've had to compromise in a way that they didn't anticipate. Not usually in a major way, but I think that some artists get a little frustrated with amount of reviews that take place. Most artists though, I think, come out the process feeling incredibly energized and excited about putting their work in a school where the impact could be tremendous. They are also excited to have a permanent work in a public venue in New

York City. For the most part artists are very appreciative for the role that we play (both at PAPS and DCA) in terms of being their advocate to try and pave the path for them.

Specific Project Questions

Dennis Adams *Tributaries*

MH: I'm curious if there was ever any concern about Dennis Adams doing something provocative or too overtly political for a school setting? Or, on the other hand, was there anyone at PAPS or DCA as that time specifically pushing for there to be political art in schools?

MC: Tom Finkelppearl was the director of Percent for Art at that time and he was quite adventurous. And at that time the commissioner of Cultural Affairs was Schuyler Chapin and he pretty much let Tom do whatever he wanted. [In this case] there was an advantage of not having rigid oversight [in the commissioning process]. In general we were all very excited about Dennis provoking thought in a school. We felt that it was a risk worth taking and certainly no one could contest that the Civil Rights movement was something essential for every school and for every student to understand.

MH: I am curious what you think as far as who is responsible for teaching the art—specifically in cases when it has historic or didactic content. I know that Dennis has been straightforward elsewhere in his career about not wanting to have to explain his work, preferring to keep it more ambiguous. If an artist proposes doing a project that is provocative, what are his responsibilities in terms of somehow incorporating his artwork into the curriculum or training the teachers about the meaning and content of the work?

MC: The best-case scenario would be if after every project we could do a teacher training session with the artist. One of my hopes for the [PAPS] website was that it would provide background information and be a jumping off point for teachers [to incorporate the art into their lessons]. I had a goal of doing a “meet the artist” video that would be linked to photos of every [PAPS] project. You would click on the image and then there would be a video explanation by the artist about his work.

Getting back to the Long Island City High School [PAPS commission,] because there is so much depth to [Adams's] piece, and because it isn't overtly obvious, we felt that the teacher training would be advantageous. And I think it actually was. I think that it opened the piece up for quite a lot of teachers.

MH: Was Adams enthusiastic about doing the teacher training session?

MC: Yes, he participated. He was a very willing participant.

MH: That's great. I've read interviews with him where he's intentionally much more cryptic about his work and not wanting to be didactic.

MC: I think because it was for a high school he was willing. He wanted the piece to be embraced and understood.

Carrie Mae Weems *Mind, Body & Spirit*

MH: Moving on to Carrie Mae Weems...

MC: I'll just say right away that when we commissioned here there was supposed to be a swimming pool. The school's existing pool was supposed to have been renovated.

MH: Yes, in reading about this project for Walton High School it seems like there was a bit of a scandal, actually.

MC: Yes, there wasn't enough money in the end and priorities got shifted. I always felt that the project with Carrie was a lost opportunity.

MH: It seems she would be one of those artists who had to come to terms with a really significant compromise in the end.

MC: This is one case where I feel that maybe I failed as an administrator. I should have fought harder to allow her to do a photographic series somewhere else at the school, but we were sort of trapped. If I had known from the beginning what the situation would turn out to be regarding the pool, we could have come up with a whole other structure for her.

MH: Do you know if there is a chance that there ever will be a renovated pool and that her mosaics might eventually be relocated from the gym to their original intended site?

MC: I don't see those mosaics ever being moved. I don't know if they are ever going to build that pool.

MH: I would assume that Weems probably didn't have the best experience working on this project. Although, from what I've read in her project file, in the end it seems that some of her letters reveal that she eventually came to terms with the fact that her work could not be installed in the location for which it had been expressly designed.

MC: I don't think the project represents her best work.

MH: Do you remember if there were any issues that came up during the artist selection process about her gallery practice and people feeling like her work might not be totally appropriate for a school environment, considering it is typically quite steeped in racial politics and identity issues.

MC: Not really, there was sense that maybe the students would really respond to her work and that her work was a reflection of that particular student body and issues that they were preoccupied with. And that did carry through, Carrie did work with the students on developing the artwork. But I do think we lost something by not letting her just do a photography series.

Something that I learned from this experience is that after Weems I spoke up for other photographers and said we have to find a way to make their photographs work—for example with Jim Casbere [*Theater of Dionysus (350 BCE)*, 2006 at the High School for Construction Trades, Engineering and Architecture.] Originally his project was going to be something else and I expressed that I thought it would be a huge mistake not to have him do his photos and that we would just have to figure out a way of installing them to make them permanent. I really learned from the experience of working with Carrie and having always seen that collaboration as a missed opportunity. I think it is often a mistake to force artists to translate their work into unfamiliar materials and to risk removing the artists' touch to the degree that we sometimes do. Other examples, which taught me about this, was at Boys' and Girls' High School, the work by Vincent Smith [*Untitled*, 1976] as well as all the other artists [Eldzier Cortor, Ernest Crichlow, Norman Lewis and Edward Wilson] who fabricated their own work for this site. I really learned a lot from looking at Boys' and Girls' High School and seeing how those pieces were commissioned and then integrated into the building.

Bill and Mary Buchen Sound Carnival

MH: It seems like the Buchens might be the polar opposite, in certain key ways, from artists who are coming into the PAPS commission never having done a permanent public work. They have so much experience creating this type of work—they have practice working with architects, landscape designers, contractors and construction crews, for example. Does this make them easier to work with?

MC: Yes, in that way, they are like the perfect team to commission for a public art piece in a school. They were incredibly professional in both projects.

MH: What, in your experience, are the differences in working with artists who can be described as professional public artists, or career public artists, vs. those who are coming to a PAPS commission never having creating a permanent work of public art?

MC: The Buchens were certainly an incredible team to work with because they were already accustomed to the aesthetic and production of public projects. I worked with the Buchens very early on so I learned from them quite a bit. As the program evolved and I gained more expertise there was a bit of a role reversal and I became more of a guide to the artists who were totally unfamiliar with public art.

MH: Do you see the Buchens as spearheading in any way the trend towards public art becoming increasingly participatory?

MC: Because participation was part of their practice from the beginning, I would say it made perfect sense to fit them into a school context. And both their projects have been successful from the very beginning.

MH: I am also interested to know if the participatory nature of their work introduced an added level of liability that is not usually of concern for PAPS projects?

MC: There really aren't elements that kids are going to climb on in terms of any great height. But the Buchens did have to be very careful in designing with that in mind and in order to avoid liability. *Sound Carnival* is not a climbing playground. The elements are speaking tubes so it is interactive and playful, but it is not the same as designing play equipment that kids will climb on. But I do think that because they were doing a lot of participatory things and outdoor structures that they may have liability insurance for their corporation: Son Arc Inc. They formed their own corporation so that they would not be personally liable.

Jones & Ginzel / "Mnemonics" Stuyvesant HS

MH: In many ways *Mnemonics* seems to be a hugely successful commission—the artists engaged the community, worked well with the architects, and created a meaningful and unique artwork for the school. Additionally, the piece was well received by the community and also received some attention from the art world and press coverage. Why would you say this project a particularly good model for future PAPS projects?

MC: I think [*Mnemonics*] was a really important new model, that it really was unprecedented from what I am aware of, and at least certainly in the New York City public schools, or any schools for that matter. I think that it does provide an important basis of comparison because it succeeds on so many levels and really is a multivalent project.

MH: A hiccup that I noticed when reviewing the project files is in *Mnemonics*'s after-life. There have been so many instances of vandalism.

MC: One of the reasons why it is so challenging with *Mnemonics* is because its dispersed everywhere throughout the school, so you can't just say: This is where the artwork is, leave it alone. It's a problem of ownership of the building. It's like Frank Lloyd Wright saying you cannot put this other piece of furniture in my design.

The piece has been vandalized by students and the installation was also damaged when the school was used as an emergency staging area after 9/11.

Then there is the story of the commemorative plaque. At one point the school was trying to do a fundraiser and they were trying to be creative and, in their view, enhance the education of the kids. The victim of this new initiative however, was the original art installation.

MH: In terms of the vandalism, that is not something that could have been predicted necessarily, but it does seem to mar the otherwise near perfect reputation of this PAPS project.

MC: I am very surprised about the degree of vandalism that happened with those blocks because I think in theory the students really love them. It is not something that anyone would have expected.

Mara Hoberman Interview with Kristin Jones February 24, 2010

MH: I am curious if when you look back on the Stuyvesant project whether you have had thoughts about anything you would have done differently and also if, based on your experience, you have any advice for the PAPS program or other artists who may be embarking on their first PAPS project?

KJ: Unfortunately you can't really choose the people you work with, and I find the [PAPS] experience really has everything to do with the people. I think that something for everyone to keep in mind is the understanding of how very great a privilege it is to be able to work on a project like this. It is so rare to have any money for a public art project. And it is important, therefore, to be really conscious of that. It's a pretty huge responsibility because the people who have voted in an artist, or at least sanctioned this idea of there being art when we all know there are so many other things that are also needed, have made it a priority and said: art is necessary and deserving of time and attention. To get there takes a lot of fighting for every year on the part of so many people behind the scenes. [Public art] is not something to be taken lightly. Of course art can be fun and it doesn't have to go on and on...like this enormous ongoing project [*Mnemonics*], but Stuyvesant is a really unusual school and Andrew and I thought that taking on the project here would be a great learning experience for us.

MH: In a way the fact that the *Mnemonics* is ongoing makes this project seem very relevant even all these years later, over a decade since it was unveiled. The fact that nature of the artwork is that it is meant to continue and grow as new classes graduate and fill their cubes with artifacts and mementos makes this PAPS project different from a more typical piece that would be hung on the wall or otherwise installed and then be done with.

KJ: Technically the bylines in the Percent for Art legislature require that an artwork be "maintenance free" and that the work last 100 years. The SCA builds buildings that are meant to last 100 years. Not all buildings in New York are built that way, so the quality of the materials is always a big part of a PAPS project and often times artists will produce a work of art that is completely permanent, indestructible and unquestionable. It becomes an object, solid and unchanging like a rock.

MH: And on the contrary, you conceived of *Mnemonics* as an ongoing, participatory artwork. But did you anticipate the huge amount of time and work that you have put in to this project since it was installed in 1993? Knowing now the hours and money that have gone into the project, is there anything that you would have done differently looking back?

KJ: I wish that there were a way for the school to really take responsibility [for *Mnemonics*]. I wish there were a mechanism in place, for example, perhaps an art teacher who could take it on as a project. We've tried many ways to find a "cube coordinator." We've met with and tried to involve parent liaisons. I believe it's possible [to make it work], but we are sort of making it up as we go along and it is difficult.

[Caring for and keeping up *Mnemonics*] is supposedly included in the school bylines, but I am not sure that they've even elected a "cube coordinator" this year or that they're planning a "block party."

MH: And you can't possibly oversee all of that at this point.

KJ: No. But that said, Andrew and I work because we enjoy the challenge of doing impossible tasks. We're certainly not about money, but it does make it difficult to continue to dedicate so much time to a particular project.

MH: I can imagine that it must be frustrating to feel that you are giving your time to this project, but that others who supposedly have ownership of *Mnemonics* are not.

KJ: Well in a way that will always be the case because [a public artwork] is still your idea, it's your project and that makes you responsible. In a sense you can't ever let it go. It's a bit like having a child—[*Mnemonics*] is definitely like one of our children. The building opened in 1993 and so now we are getting into the teenage years and the kid growing up and needs his own room!

MH: This project is such a huge undertaking, do you have a rough estimate of how many different people you had to rely on to make the whole thing come together.

KJ: We had lots of people working on various parts of the project at various times. For instance we had students who worked for us contacting the various embassies to ask them to send artifacts for the blocks. They were paid out of the Mayor's Office through some funding set up for students to work over the summers. And then, also because Stuyvesant is such an important school with a great reputation and well-connected alumni, we had access to various experts. For instance for the blocks that have insects inside of them, we were able to meet with the person who creates mounts for insect vitrines at the Museum of Natural History. Because it was Stuyvesant we got to "steal" a lot of expert advice through various connections.

Mara Hoberman interview with Dennis Adams (February 12, 2010)

MH: What was your initial reaction when the Percent for Art office contacted you about being a finalist for a Public Schools commission?

DA: I was ambivalent. There is a language to these commissions, which I find tedious, predictable and boring.

MH: Do you think it has to be that way?

DA: Well, when you are talking about design-by-committee—which is the case with these projects—I think it does. When you have a lot of people involved in the process even those cultural workers that are most knowledgeable and supportive are torn between the project and community pandering. I really feel for those people. They are between a rock and a hard place.

MH: Cultural workers are definitely essential in a process like Public Art for Public schools—the artist almost always needs a strong and sympathetic liaison to help him navigate the bureaucratic process. The cultural worker can be, and should be, a real ally.

DA: I prefer to work with one on one. That generally produces a better project than design-by-committee.

MH: Based on what you've said about public art commissions coming out of a non-stimulating, bureaucratic, design-by-committee process, it is interesting to me that you agreed to take on the Long Island City High School commission at all. Did you submit slides to the Percent for Art Registry hoping that you would be selected for a school project?

DA: I don't remember, maybe my gallery did. My earliest public projects were Bus Shelters that I produced myself—meaning I paid for production and built them myself. I asked the Public Art Fund only to help me secure a site and create a publicity umbrella for the projects.

MH: In reading about your early work, definitely the “Bus Shelter” series and also *Men at Work*, which you did in Geneva, it is hard to imagine the PAPS selection panel looking at slides of those projects and deciding that you would be a perfect fit for a school project. It's interesting to me that they would have called you in after having looked at examples of your work that are emphatically temporary and which are clearly meant to be provocative and challenging. I'm curious why you think you were selected by the [Public Art for Public Schools] committee.

DA: I believe I was picked because I was hot at that moment, not because of any one specific work. If I had presented the same work but had been an unknown artist, I don't believe they would have picked me.

MH: Still, the panel must have known that what you would come back with for the PAPS commission would be in the same vein as your typical practice. They couldn't have expected that you would suddenly turn around and produce some benign mural for a school.

DA: Well, there is always a little bit of that in the public process. Often they will bring an artist in because they think he's edgy and has done all of these cool projects, but then when it comes down to the actual commission and the artist gives one of these, the committee goes: No thank you, too edgy.

MH: Did something like that happen in the case of the Long Island City High School commission?

DA: No, it didn't happen there, but it has happened to me in other cases. At that time, I was working on many projects all over the world. Every project was being tested against a spectrum of projects. Projects and sites were getting beautifully confused in my head. I was becoming a bit clairvoyant. I was young and I was shooting from the hip.

MH: But the PAPS project must have been different in certain key ways from everything else you had going on and presented certain challenges given the intense amount of oversight.

DA: Well, yes, it was a permanent project and typically I don't like to do permanent projects. As I said, I really don't go out and solicit these types of commissions.

MH: So did you accept the PAPS commission as a kind of challenge?

DA: No. I took it just as another project.

MH: So really, why did you say yes?

DA: Because it was for a school. And my nomadic act was wearing thin. I was jetlagged and this project felt innocence and near home.

MH: The PAPS commissions are notoriously long and exhausting projects—was there ever a point when you felt like bowing out or saying no?

DA: No, I tried instead to keep it simple and on task. One thing I decided I was not going to do, is work with the architects. I don't believe in artist-architect collaborations. I believe in architecture, but I don't believe in architects. I believe in the power of architecture and especially the importance of its role in framing learning environments. That is a big idea and I would not want to be integrated into a scheme I didn't believe in.

MH: That's an interesting point because collaboration between artist and architect is something that the PAPS program is really keen on—they try to nudge the artist towards working in tandem and collaborating somehow with the architect.

DA: Yes, they love that. That was the feel good language of that time. But I never bought into it and I still don't. It didn't work then and it doesn't work today. It's a mythology. It's part of the industry. It sounds good at a meeting. Everyone leaves smiling.

MH: And a big part of it is the fact that artist-architect collaboration can potentially cut costs all around, making things cheaper for everyone.

DA: The bottom line is that the architects don't really want to work with the artists because they consider themselves artists. And, of course, 99. % of the time they're not. They long for artistic pedigree. I long not to be to be an architect and to be left alone.

I never studied the site plans before making my proposal for Long Island City High School. I just asked: How many drinking fountains will there be and where are they going? I'd already done a drinking fountain piece in Montreal. I jumped on the idea of the drinking fountain because A) they're essential in a school and B) they're at a site of direct communication between students, outside the official program. So in the end, I never had to visit the construction site or wear a hard hat, I never wanted to do any of that.

MH: None of those aspects of the process interested you?

DA: No, I just told them to let me know once they picked the drinking fountain model and at that point I would create an interface with it. All I asked for was the exact sites and the model for the fountains. I knew I wanted to work with something that was prescribed in the architecture's utility, not part of the design. That freed me so that I didn't have to play pseudo-architect, collaborator, designer, any of that.

MH: And did you also choose the water fountains in part because they are explicitly not in the classroom?

DA: Yes, they were in a public area. They're double drinking fountains, which also had a strong historical connotation I liked.

MH: Regarding the educational aspect of *Tributaries*, something that seems to have kept coming up when I was looking through the SCA's file on this project (and which I haven't seen happen with any other PAPS commissions) is that the Department of Education was really intent on having you provide a way to incorporate the civil right's images into the school's curriculum.

DA: That's not the role of a work of art. The role of a work of art is to be provocative. I believe that the artist should call the question and then it is up to everybody else. The hope is that the question can be asked in a very beautiful profound way. After that it is about reception and you have to trust your audience to formulate a response. You can't

hand people something on a platter, especially not young people who want to form their own opinions and interpretations.

MH: Are you saying that teaching the art ruins the idea of having art in a school? That it stifles the process of individual thinking?

DA: I remember having to go out to the high School to talk to the teachers and students about my project. Some of the teachers were not pleased. The dissent was led by one teacher—an older man who was bitter and was going to take it out on me and the kids. He seemed to have a lot of clout—probably he was tenured—and he tried to rally the other teachers against the project. Some of the teachers bought into it partially, some resisted, but the kids they totally resisted.

MH: Was this teacher unhappy with the subject matter being the civil rights movement?

DA: He said that it was not a broad enough topic, that it was not for everybody. He found it too limited. What a thing to say! I would think social equality relates to everyone. The civil rights movement is a key moment in the history of the last 100 years and it will continue to inspire future generations. It's about freedom and justice—what is more universal than that?

MH: There was also a moment when you were working on the Long Island City High School project when members of the community tried to insist that you provide them with 21 images from which they could choose 14 “appropriate” images for the school. How did you feel about that?

DA: Well that doesn't work. Why would I do that? I am the artist. I was commissioned to do a piece so I am going to choose the images. My experience has taught me that the first time you bend over for people, it's over, it will just lead to more and more concessions. They can never get enough. Somebody needs to step in those cases—a good cultural worker—and say: “That's not what a work of art is about.”

MH: Do you feel like the people you were working with at Percent for Art and PAPS did step in on your behalf?

DA: I think for that particular project they were OK. But I worked on another project with Percent for Art that had every problem one could imagine. In the end, it was finished but never opened to the public. Even if you get through the whole process and your ready to install you have the unions on site threatening your workers. The best way to get around the unions is to wait until all the construction work is done and they leave the site. So much, for the interface with the architect. At the Long Island high school we also had a confrontation with the union.

MH: In the end are you happy with the outcome of *Tributaries*? Is it what you wanted?

DA: To be honest with you, when I finished the project I had no interest in it at all. It's not that I thought it was bad, it's just that it represented a lateral move for me. I thought it was a good project given its context.

MH: Does that mean you think you did the best you could, given the situation?

DA: Yes, but there are limits of what you can do given the whole process. Good art rarely comes out of committee—that doesn't work. I want to make a public work that changes my consciousness, that scares the hell out of me. That's the best way to hand a project over to the public. This project didn't do that for me. But it turned out that there were a lot of other people who did like the project for various reasons. Experts on public art liked it very much—people like Patty Phillips, for instance. And I heard the kids liked it, which is nice.

MH: Have you been back to visit Long Island City High School since the piece was installed?

DA: I was back last year because they had to reprint the photographs. The photos had started to fade a little bit over all those years. They have since been replaced and look great.

MH: Do you think there is a better system for commissioning public art?

DA: In the best possible system there would be no competitions, just one person invited.

MH: Selected how, named by a cultural ambassador?

DA: Well, there are problems with that too. But I still believe you would get a better work. Many panelists representing the community don't feel comfortable with the language of artistic intention with all its open-ended metaphors, so they retreat to notions that they do feel comfortable with, which are usually ideas of utility and safety. With the right players a jury could be a beautiful thing, but that is rarely the case. The short answer is: I don't know the right way to do it. In the end an artwork is made by one form of consciousness and it may take one form of consciousness to support it, however that can be manifested.

MH: Do you have advice for an artist embarking on a PAPS project for the first time?

DA: If you want to win a any public art competition, offer very little. Give them almost nothing so they can't ask too many questions. The more you say, the more you will be held accountable for all the details. Present a rough idea onto which everyone can project what he or she wants to see. As soon as you bring out a detailed model, the whole concept will get muddled in small issues of utility and safety paranoia. All I gave them for the Long Island City High School project were a few photos pasted on some photocopies of a standard drinking fountain.

MH: Do you have any suggestions for how the PAPS process could be improved?

DA: A great thing would be to take the percent for art money and create a truly public moment for the students. I would draw them into the process and produce a temporary project that might or might not have a permanent residue. The students could publish a book or create some other public platform that would document a larger process of collaboration. For me something like that would be a really transformative moment in the relationship between the artist and the educational system. Why does the art have to be tied to the physical place—the school’s architecture—why does it have to be inscribed in bricks and mortar? That’s so old fashioned. The artist could share his whole vision with the students. I’ve tried proposing temporary interactive projects for permanent projects and they are always rejected.

**Mara Hoberman interview with Bill & Mary Buchen Interview (via email)
February 19, 2010**

MH: What would you say are your main goals in creating an artwork for a school?

BUCHENS: To create an interactive learning environment where children can learn about the science, history and practice of music

MH: Having completed Sound Playground not long before the commission for a PS 244 came about, were there any specific issues that you wanted to address with Sound Carnival based on your previous experience working with PAPS?

BUCHENS: Both were designed for the same experience, at PS 244 it was also K-3 in one area (telephone tubes)

MH: Was your experience working on Sound Carnival significantly easier (or smoother) having already gone through the PAPS commission and installation processes with Sound Playground?

BUCHENS: Each had a different learning curve, working with different trade unions is always an enlightening experience. At PS 23 there were flaws in the original concrete work in the back of the school and the whole project had to be ripped out and rebuilt again at the contractor's expense.

MH: In general how did you find the PAPS panel process: inspiring, frustrating, helpful, democratic, taxing, stimulating?

BUCHENS: Presenting before panels is an excellent way to develop presentation skills. You have to show your best ideas and hope you're chosen.

MH: What was the greatest challenge you faced while working on Sound Carnival?

BUCHENS: Trade unions, we had to dig through 2" of hardened asphalt and concrete by hand instead of bringing in a backhoe!

MH: How was it to work with the architects and general contractor on your PAPS commissions?

BUCHENS: Excellent, we had great architects to work with Gil Gilligio from Montoya Roderiquiz and Ida Siegfried from Perkins-Will

MH: What advice would you give artists who are embarking on a PAPS commission for the first time?

BUCHENS: Have a clear vision, good drawings, accurate budget, and leave money for contingency! It is helpful to be familiar with basic construction and engineering ideas. Structures by J. Gordon is helpful and so is Why Buildings Stand Up. If you're doing concrete get a vocational school textbook on concrete forms.

MH: In an ideal situation, how would you like Sound Carnival to function as part of PS 244?

BUCHENS: We want it to be part of the music and science curriculum.

MH: Do you feel that the work has lived up to its potential?

BUCHENS: Its up to the City Budget for music and science teachers, we create interactive musical instruments and there is a curriculum-teaching booklet that's unique in America.

MH: Is liability an issue when creating interactive artworks for schools?

BUCHENS: Yes, that's why liability insurance is required. Upon acceptance liability is passed on to the city

Mara Hoberman interview with Carrie Mae Weems February 17, 2010

MH: When you first received word that you had been offered the PAPS commission for Walton High School were you excited? Were you interested in doing a permanent public work at that particular moment? Did you have any initial concerns?

CMW: I wasn't worried about it. I thought it was a wonderful idea.

MH: Had you submit your work to the Percent for Art registry because you wanted to be considered for a project of this nature, or was it at all a surprise to be selected for the commission?

CMW: I don't remember anymore. I recall that they contacted me along with a small group of other artists and asked us to consider doing something for Walton High School. There might have been eight to ten different artists who made presentations in a public forum with people from the school, representatives from Public Art for Public Schools, some City officials, if I recall. All of the artists had to sort of pitch our work. Not necessarily what we were going to do, but who we were as artists, what our work was like, what we were thinking about, our general concerns. It was after this meeting that I got the call that I would be one of the artists selected to do something for Walton.

MH: How did you find the panel process in general—frustrating, interesting, challenging, all of the above? Did the fact that there were so many different constituencies, many of whom you've just named—school, community, City officials, and so on—make it difficult to navigate at all?

CMW: I always find presenting in front of a group of people to be interesting and so I didn't find [the panel] to be frustrating or intimidating or odd or weird. I just assumed that here was a group of people all of whom in some way or another had a vested interest in a successful outcome for this project.

MH: Some people would call this art-by-committee and say that it stifles creativity, but it doesn't sound like you would necessarily agree with that.

CMW: No I don't feel that way about it. For me I don't mind being put in that situation [where there are a lot of people weighing in on a particular art commission.] I think that those committees have a right to know who they are commissioning to do a project for them and one of the ways in which they can come to know that is for artists to present a sense of their past work and their history. So it seemed very normal and a very fair process. I wasn't intimidated by it by any means.

MH: Still, it must have felt at least slightly different from how you would normally go about conceiving of a work of art, whether it be private commission or personal project. Would you say that was the case?

CMW: Not really, I was making a presentation for a group of people who were going to decide on what group of artists they wanted to work with. So at that point I didn't submit any ideas for what I was going to do [at Walton], I simply showed what I had done before. I do that all the time, right whether I am at various universities or giving a lecture or at a community gathering, I am always presenting my work to people, so it is not odd for me or a strange experience to have people say: We'd like to know who you are and what you do. They had asked me to come because there was some sort of interest in my work already and they wanted to know what my contribution might be to a school.

MH: What about when you were further along in the process, when you presented more concrete ideas, did you have any sense of having to answer to too many people or too many questions?

CMW: There were really never any problems. I think I had a pretty strong sense of what I wanted to do and that didn't change over the course of working on the project really. Nothing was weird or awkward or embarrassing. I never felt like I was speaking down to anyone or that anybody was speaking down to me. It felt very normal and right.

MH: When you did eventually learn that the pool wouldn't be ready and your mosaics would not be able to be placed in the location for which they had been specifically designed, was that crushing?

CMW: It wasn't crushing, it was disappointing. Not simply for the work, it was disappointing for the school. That this extraordinary facility wasn't going to be renovated. But the deeper thing really, and what was really a serious problem was that at a certain point I started to realize that the school was being really ripped off. The construction itself was so poor that they were ripping out these extraordinary wooden panels and marble and beautiful light fixtures from the turn of the century. They were taking all the best of what the school had and putting in really shoddy construction in its place. By the end of the first term of the renovation, the new doors were already falling off of their hinges. That you would replace marble with faux-marble or an extraordinary lighting fixture with something that you got from Home Depot made me realize that there was something very deeply wrong going on. I thought it was really a bit of organized crime, that the construction company itself was run by a syndicate who had been hired to this job for the schools and who was getting extraordinary sums of money and really what they were doing was ripping off the school. That was something I was really annoyed about. I made a number of phone calls to various people, to various authorities, to make my complaints because I knew that something was terribly wrong and so you have this really beautiful school that was being shammed across the board and there was nothing that anyone could do about it.

MH: So nothing ever came of the letters and phone calls to the authorities?

CMW: No, nothing did.

MH: Did you ever think of looking into taking any sort of legal action because of the mismanagement and the fact that your work was not placed where it was supposed to be placed in the end?

CMW: I did contact the Percent for Art program. I made a series of phone calls out of frustration and anger that the school would be so wrongly treated and that nobody would step up to the plate to call it what it was. I believe seriously that organized crime was a part of it, as they are in a lot of construction projects in New York. And with poorer schools, more disenfranchised schools, then it happens even more. Without really serious oversight at the school where the principals and the community are really involved and engaged, then ultimately the school gets taken advantage of.

MH: I wanted to ask you if you have an idea of what you think in general the role of public art in a public school should be and if you feel that even in its compromised location if your piece fulfills that role – for you, for the school, for the community?

CMW: I haven't given that a lot of thought. I've participated in so few public art projects. But I did think that what I really wanted to do more than anything was to invest in the school and in the students who were there at that time. I wanted to make a work that really involved them and so I photographed them. And my mosaics were based on these photographs that I did. That to me was something very important that the art not be this sort of heroic art that is removed from the people actually at the school, but that it be based on the people of the school itself, its history, the alumni. In a few years the students would be able to come back and point to a mosaic and say, "That was me when I was sixteen." They were meant to represent in the strongest way, the body of the school.

MH: It seems very much a celebration of the heart and soul of the school, which would be the students. I'm curious how you organized to work with the students to do the portraits. Was it complicated or was it easy and natural.

CMW: I've been very lucky I think because I work with people very well, most of the time. I think once the principal and Percent for Art knew that I was going to be really working with the kids there everybody got very excited about that idea—that the images would be based on the alumni. People were very excited and everyone was very helpful. I was constantly in touch with the principal and the school secretaries. The kids were really excited that they were going to be photographed. It was really easy. Absolutely no problem. I was very lucky. I had absolute cooperation. And it was really an easy project to realize. The hardest part was just getting the mosaics actually made in a way that I thought would be really lovely and important.

MH: Do you think in general working on a PAPS commission is a positive experience that you might recommend to another artist, who might not necessarily be naturally inclined to do a permanent public work? Would you say it is something that is worthwhile or that changes you in any way.

CMW: I don't know if it changes you or not, but it is certainly worthwhile. The thing that I believe is that in the end people come to you for what you do. I'm sort of known for working with imagery in certain kinds of communities—that's been my work. It's not like you are pulling a rabbit out of a hat, or pulling the longest straw—they contacted me because of the way I approach things artistically. To that extent, if an artist is asked to do a public art project, I think that the most important thing to hold on to are the principles that they have going into the game. It becomes more of a problem if you start to bend yourself to somebody else's will, particularly when they don't know what they want. It's on you to have a sense of what you really want to see. I didn't wait for the school to tell me what they wanted, I just thought: OK, I am going to make some visits to the school, look around, see what's happening there and then I am going to propose what I think I should be doing in that place. Hopefully the idea is to go with what you really want to do in that school so that you end up with something that you feel really belongs there. Something that really comes out of my conceptual way of thinking about a problem and solving that problem for a space I don't normally participate in.

MH: I'm curious what was your greatest challenge during the PAPS process or if you have any regrets—anything you wish you had done differently or hadn't done?

CMW: Not really. My greatest disappointment, as I said earlier, and really the more important issue was that these schools have the possibility of being taken advantage of by these negative forces that operate within the construction authority itself. There was no way to mitigate that or for the school to step up to that and say, "These are the kinds of materials we want, no you can't remove our marble, you can't take away our beautiful 1920's light fixtures and put Home Depot light globes in. No you can't put in hollow doors. That kind of rip off was the deep deep deep sorrow and realization that there is a great deal of crime that goes on within the public sector that needs to be controlled. The fact that I didn't have the ability, the force, the power to negotiate that was disappointing for me. I worked with some of the best mosaic workers in the world, people who have worked for the Vatican and in St. Petersburg, they've worked all over the world. They are master craftsman and I was able to work with this great fabricator to realize the mosaics was extraordinary and I learned a great deal about how to make a work—how to use a photograph and then reinterpret that photograph so that it could actually be made into a mosaic that made sense. That was really a powerful learning curve for me. I knew that the photograph would have to become an illustration, which would become a drawing, which would become a painting, which would have to become a mosaic. I think that was an exciting process for me to experience and learn about.

MH: Have you been back to visit the school at all since the piece was installed?

CMW: I think I went back once, but not in quite a while. I did go back after the piece had been installed to look at it and think about it and so forth.

MH: Were there students around?

CMW: Nobody was around, no. It's in a place that is used only for particular events, mostly in the evenings, so I don't think I was there during a dance or a game or anything like that.

MH: So no dodge ball was being played in the presence of the mosaics?!

CMW: No, no hopscotch or other games that kids would be playing most of the time, no.

One of the things that I found interesting in visiting various sites while working on this project and going to look at what other artists have done in schools, I saw that some artists weren't really paying attention to where they were – to the environment itself – that they were just treating it as a kind of project, but for me it didn't really make a lot of sense. So I was always really interested to know what other artists were thinking – why this project for this school? I try to pay attention to what's happening around, the context of something. I certainly have often had questions about the kinds of decisions artists were making for work in schools. Why they decided to make certain work for a school. I'd be interested in how students interact with a piece. I didn't have a sense that students were always engaged or moved or interested in the artworks I've seen in schools, which is problematic.

MH: It's a really difficult thing to try to quantify or qualify the general reaction to an artwork. PAPS hasn't really found a good way to do any kind of outcomes assessments.

CMW: It's a good question because something that seems really relevant and great today, may seem superficial and not important later on. Or maybe it is the opposite, where it's not something that you react to immediately in the moment, but after a long time you realize—15 years later—remember that artwork. It has the possibility of working on so many levels. One of the reasons I decided I would try to base the work on the students there was because in some small way at least there would continuously be a reference to the student body and that there would constantly be a reference to the fine art of mosaic-making. There is a way that we ourselves are heroic in our individual capacity. These ideas about beauty and strength would hopefully continue to be important and that they would be applied to black bodies and yellow bodies and brown bodies and white bodies.

MH: There's something very relatable about your piece at Walton—typically schools are filled with the heroes of education: mathematicians, scientists, explorers, and astronomers—everyone you are supposed to learn about in a classroom. But your mosaics celebrate the students themselves—they are really a way to show that everyone can be heroic.

CMW: Let's hope that 50 years from now, before they tear the school down, that still matters.

LOCAL LAWS
OF
THE CITY OF NEW YORK
FOR THE YEAR 1982

No. 65

Introduced by Council Member Sadowsky (by request of the Mayor) and Council Members Dryfoos,
Linzer and Stern; also Council Members Messinger, Michaels and Wallace—

A LOCAL LAW

To amend the New York City Charter, in relation to providing
for works of art in public buildings.

Be it enacted by the Council as follows:

Section 1. Chapter nine of the New York city charter is amended by adding a new section two
hundred thirty-four, to read as follows:

§ 234. Works of art. a. As used in this section the term "works of art" includes all forms of
the visual arts conceived in any medium, material or combination thereof.

b. Works of art shall be provided for each capital project which involves the construction or the
substantial reconstruction of a city-owned public building or structure the intended use of which
requires that it be accessible to the public generally or to members of the public participating in
recreational or exercising programs, services or benefits provided therein. For the purposes of this section,
a police precinct house and a firehouse shall be deemed to be such buildings.

c. An amount not less than one per cent of the first twenty million dollars and one-half of one
per cent of any amount in excess of twenty million dollars of capital funds appropriated by the city
for each such capital project, other than funds appropriated for the acquisition of real property, shall
be allocated for works of art provided, however, that this section shall in no case require the
expenditure of more than four hundred thousand dollars for works of art for any capital project; nor
more than the sum of one and one-half million dollars for works of art in any fiscal year. The mayor

may exempt a capital project from the provisions of this section if in his sole judgment the inclusion of works of art as provided hereby would be inappropriate.

d. Reasonable advance notification of the intention to include works of art in a project shall be provided to the appropriate district council member, council-members-at-large, borough president and chairperson of the community board of the district in which the project is located. All such works of art shall be subject to the approval of the art commission pursuant to section eight hundred fifty-four of this chapter.

e. The mayor shall adopt rules and regulations to implement the provisions of this section.

§ 7. This local law shall take effect immediately and shall apply to any capital project for which the scope of project is submitted for approval on or after January first, nineteen hundred eighty-two.

THE CITY OF NEW YORK, OFFICE OF THE CITY CLERK, s. 34

I hereby certify that the foregoing is a true copy of a local law of The City of New York, passed by the Council on October 14, 1982, and approved by the Mayor on October 29, 1982.

DAVID M. DENKINS, City Clerk, Clerk of the Council.

DECLARATION PURSUANT TO MUNICIPAL HOME RULE LAW SECTION 27

Pursuant to the provisions of Municipal Home Rule Law Section 27, I hereby certify that the enclosed local law (Local Law 65 of 1982; Chapter (L. 1982-A)) contains the correct text and:

Received the following vote at the meeting of the New York City Council on October 14, 1982:

29 FOR 7 AGAINST 1 NOT VOTING

Was approved by the Mayor on October 29, 1982.

Was returned to the City Clerk on October 29, 1982:

FREDERICK A. D. SCHWARZ, JR., Corporation Counsel.

1327
1985

THE COUNCIL

The City of New York

Int. No. 1012

September 12, 1985

Introduced by Council Member Gerges; also Council Members Michels and Wooten — read and referred to the Committee on Finance.

A LOCAL LAW

To amend the New York City Charter, in relation to providing for works of art in buildings.

1 *Be it enacted by the Council as follows:*

2 Section one. Article 1 of title C of chapter twenty-six of the New York City administrative code
3 is amended by adding a new section C26-12.0, to read as follows:

4 §C26-12.0. Works of art. — a. *As used in this section the term "works of art" includes all*
5 *forms of the visual arts conceived in any medium, material or combination thereof.*

6 b. *Works of art shall be provided for in each project which involves the new construction of any*
7 *building or structure the total cost of which exceeds ten million dollars and the intended use of which*
8 *requires that it be accessible to the public generally or to members of the public participating in,*
9 *requiring or receiving programs, services or benefits provided thereof.*

10 c. *An amount not less than one per cent of the total cost of construction shall be allocated for*
11 *works of art.*

12 §2. This Local Law shall take effect immediately.

Note: Matter in *italics* is new; matter in brackets [] to be omitted.



31 Chambers Street, 2nd Floor
New York, NY 10007
Phone: 212.513.9300
Fax: 212.341.3810

www.nyc.gov/culture

KATE D. LEVIN
Commissioner

NYC Percent for Art Program FAQS

What is the purpose of the New York City Percent for Art Program?

The Percent for Art Program offers City agencies the opportunity to acquire, commission or restore works of art specifically for City-owned buildings throughout the five boroughs. By bringing artists into the design process, the City's civic and community buildings are enriched.

What is the history of the Percent for Art Program in New York City?

In 1965 Mayor Wagner established the Executive Order that allowed City agencies to allocate a portion of a building's construction budget to art work. Although several agencies took advantage of this opportunity, the Order did not provide for consistent implementation procedures.

In 1982 the "Percent for Art" law (Local Law 65) was passed by the New York City Council requiring that 1% of the budget for eligible City-wide construction projects be spent on art work for those facilities. Implementation of the Program began September 15, 1983 and established a procedure for determining eligible projects and an equitable artist selection process.

From 1983 to 1986, the Percent for Art Program was administered by the Public Art Fund, Inc., a private non-profit arts organization, under the auspices of the Department of Cultural Affairs. Since 1986 DCLA has had full responsibility for the administration of the program.

What kind of construction projects are considered by the Program?

The "Percent for Art" law applies to City-owned capital construction projects that provide public services and accessibility. New construction projects of existing facilities undergoing substantial reconstruction are considered. These capital projects include firehouses, schools, shelters, police precincts, courthouses, hospitals, clinics, passenger terminals, prisons, detention centers, parks and sanitation facilities.

What is the Program budget and how is it allocated?

Percent for Art projects are funded by allocations from the actual construction budgets of City buildings.

The law requires that no less than 1% of the first twenty million dollars (\$20,000,000), plus no less than one half of 1% of the amount exceeding twenty million dollars be allocated for the art work. Projects can be capped at \$400,000.

What kind of art work is considered?

The art work must be located in an area of the facility that is accessible to the public.

Art work has been broadly defined in the Regulations as "all forms of visual arts conceived in any medium, material or combination thereof." It may be commissioned or purchased, or an existing City-owned art work may be restored and re-sited.

The final artwork is determined by the art allocation, nature of the project and an artist selection process involving the City agency, architect, participants in the artist selection panel and members of the community.

At what stage of the project is the artist selected?

An artist selection panel typically convenes early in the design stage so that the artist can be involved from the beginning. The art work is considered an integral part of the project process rather than an addition at the project's completion.

How are artists selected for the process?

DCLA convenes a unique artist selection panel at the initiation of each project. The architect presents the project to the panel and may recommend specific artists or concepts.

The panel then recommends sites for the art work and an artist to be commissioned or an art work to be purchased. This recommendation is based on the architect's proposal, the nature of the community and the building's functions.

The panel reviews artists from the Percent for Art Image Registry and artists recommended by the project participants. The panel bases its recommendation on the artist's most current work and any previous commissions. In some cases the panel asks several artists to submit proposals or interview for a specific project.

The voting members of the panel include:

- the Commissioner of Cultural Affairs' designee,
- a representative from the sponsoring City agency,
- a representative from the Design agency (in some cases)
- three public art professionals (critics, curators, artists, architects, historians, etc.) appointed by the Commissioner, one of whom must live or work in the borough (and when possible, the community) where the project is located.

In addition, a member of the Art Commission and the Mayor's Office of Construction serve as ex-officio, non-voting panelists.

How is the community involved?

When a construction project has been identified, the Percent for Art Program notifies the appropriate Borough President and Community Board inviting them to attend the artist selection panel meetings. Both the Borough President and the Community Board are informed of the project's progress.

The site requirements and the nature of the community are of great importance to the panel as it makes its recommendation.

How long does a project take from the selection of the artist to the installation of the art work?

City construction projects generally take from three to five years to design and build. The artist joining the project at its inception will follow the project schedule. Artists who have been commissioned should be prepared to present their design to the agency, the architect, the community, and the Art Commission for approval.

The Percent for Art Program acts as a liaison between the artist and the agencies. Procedures have been streamlined to avoid interfering with the construction schedule, but delays in the building's construction are often unavoidable. The artist works closely with the architect in order to remain informed of the building's progress.

How are the artists paid?

The selected artist has a contract with the architect that addresses the artist's responsibilities and payment schedule for the project. The art allocation must cover the artist's budget including design fee, fabrication, installation, transportation and insurance costs.

Does the Program sponsor competitions?

For some projects, the Percent for Art Program sponsors competitions. Each artist in the image registry is notified of these special opportunities.

How do artists apply?

The Percent for Art Image Registry is an important component of the Program that allows artists to participate by maintaining a record of their work. The registry is consulted by the architects, panelists, and City agencies for each project. The Percent for Art staff prepares an image presentation from the registry for each panel meeting.

Artists who are interested in submitting their work for review may download the registration form below, or write for a registration form to:

Percent for Art
Department of Cultural Affairs
31 Chambers Street, 2nd Floor
New York, NY 10007

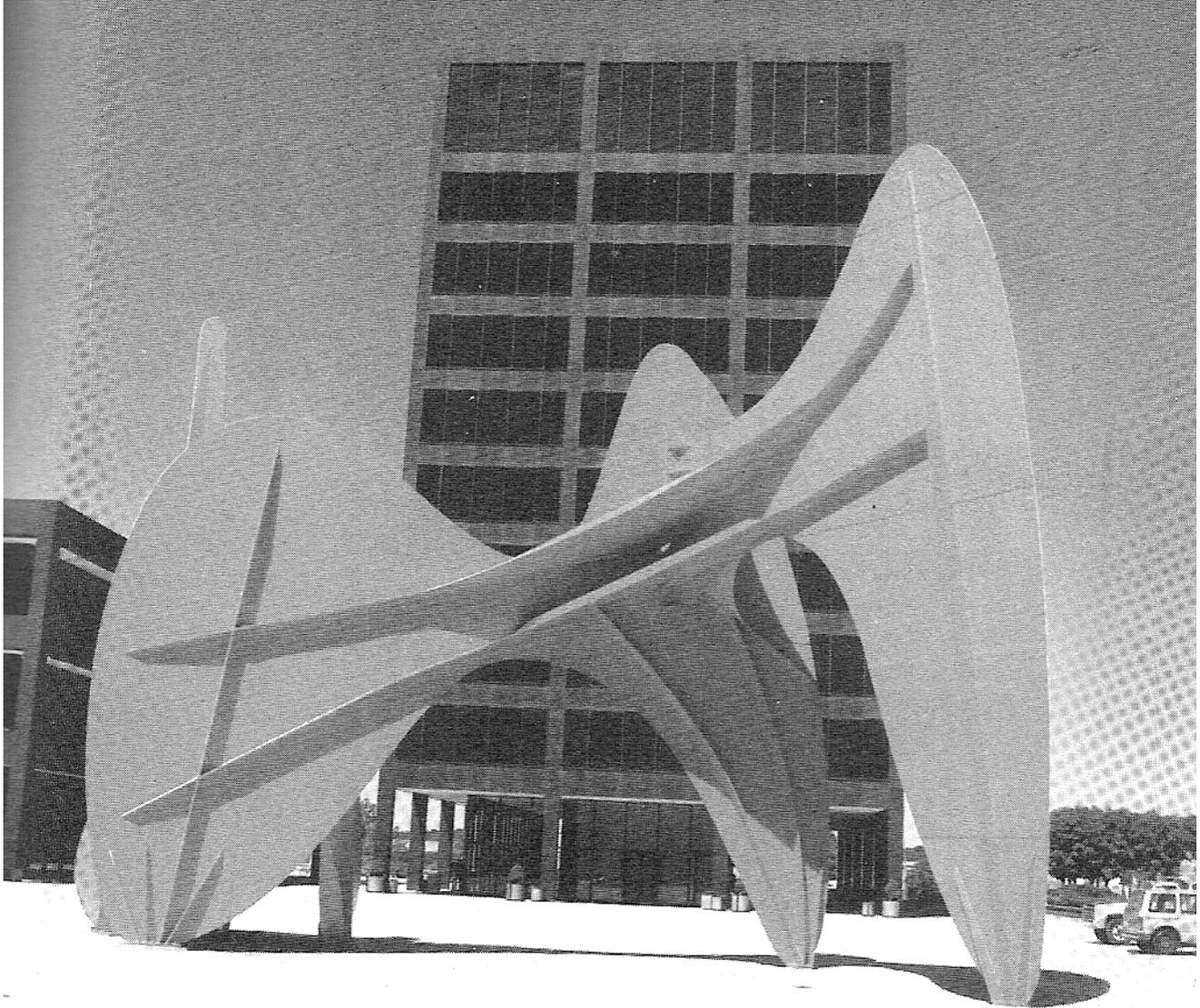
The Percent for Art Image Registry is open to any professional visual artist. There is no residency requirement for a Percent for Art Commission. Please send a completed registry form along with submission materials on CD/DVD to the Percent for Art Program. If you are interested in consulting the registry regarding a project, please call the Program office to make an appointment.



Richard Serra
Tilted Arc (1981 – 1989)
New York City
Commissioned by the General Services Administration
Photograph by Ann Chauvet



Pablo Picasso
Untitled, 1967 (the "Chicago Picasso")
Photograph by Burt Roberts



Alexander Calder
La Grand Vitesse, 1969

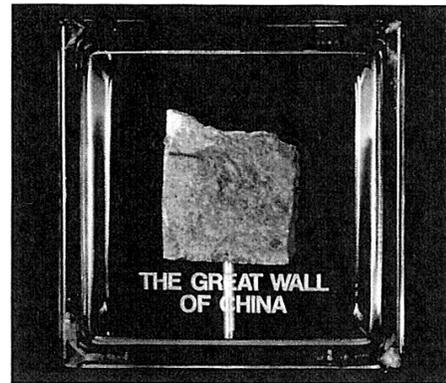


Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzel
Mnemonics (detail), 1992
Stuyvesant High School, New York City
Photograph by Stan Ries (c. 2009)

PERCENT FOR ART/NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS
STUYVESANT HIGH SCHOOL, BATTERY PARK CITY
MNEMONICS (1992), KRISTIN JONES AND ANDREW GINZEL, ARTISTS



Above, a leaf from the sacred Bo Tree in Sri Lanka is enclosed in an 8" x 8" glass block, a part of Mnemonics, at Stuyvesant High School



A fragment from the Great Wall of China, encased in an 8" x 8" glass block, one of hundreds of artifacts collected from around the world.



Above, two students from the new Stuyvesant High School converse in front of Mnemonics, an art installation built into the walls of the school and commissioned under "Percent for Art," the city-mandated arts program since 1983

Press release for *Mnemonics* (c. 1992)



Missing block from *Mnemonics* at Stuyvesant High School (c. 2002)



Dennis Adams
Tributaries, 1995
Long Island City High School, Queens, NY
Photograph by Mara Hoberman, 2010



Dennis Adams
Tributaries, 1995
Long Island City High School, Queens, NY
Photograph by Mara Hoberman, 2010



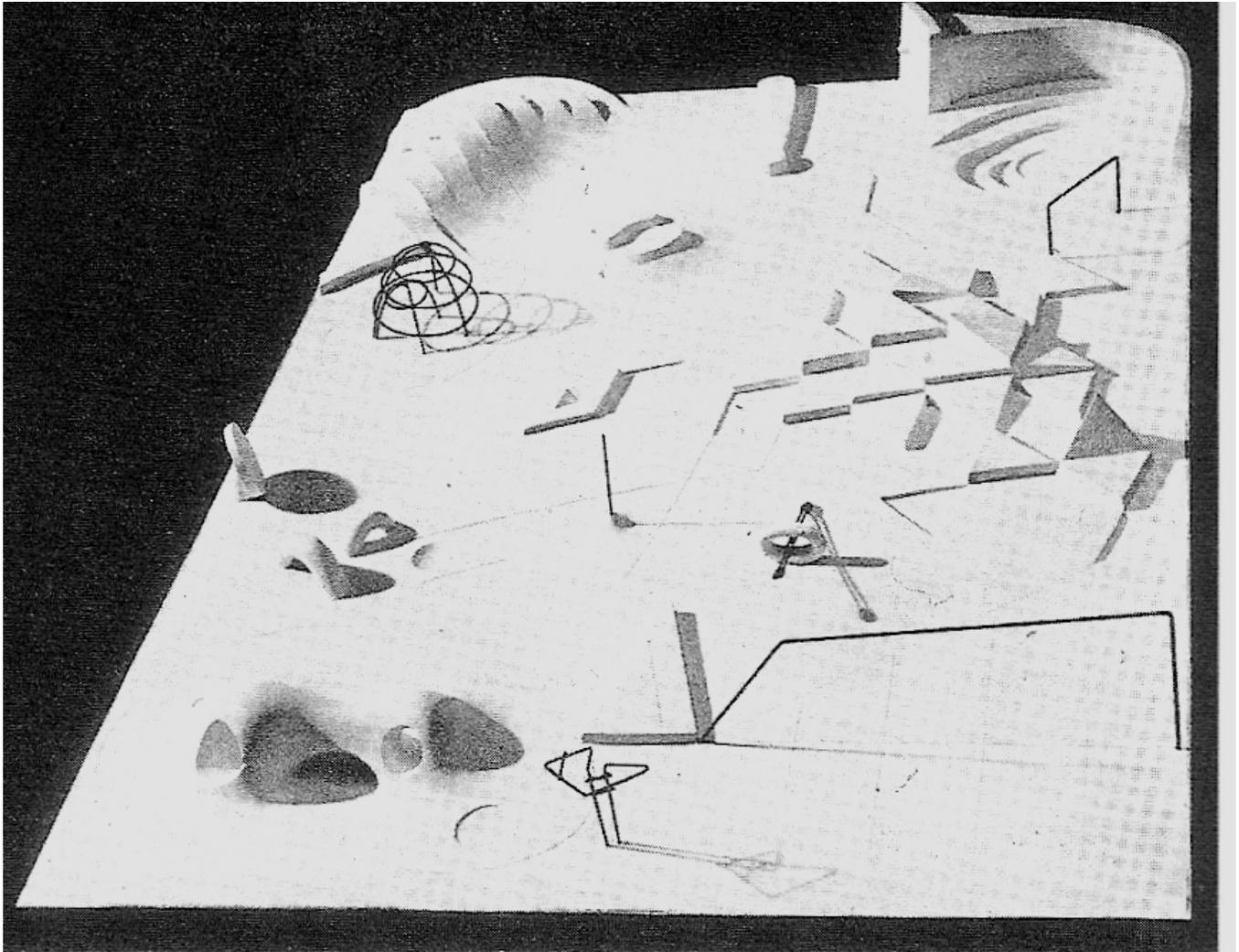
Dennis Adams
Bus Shelter I, 1983
Courtesy of Dennis Adams



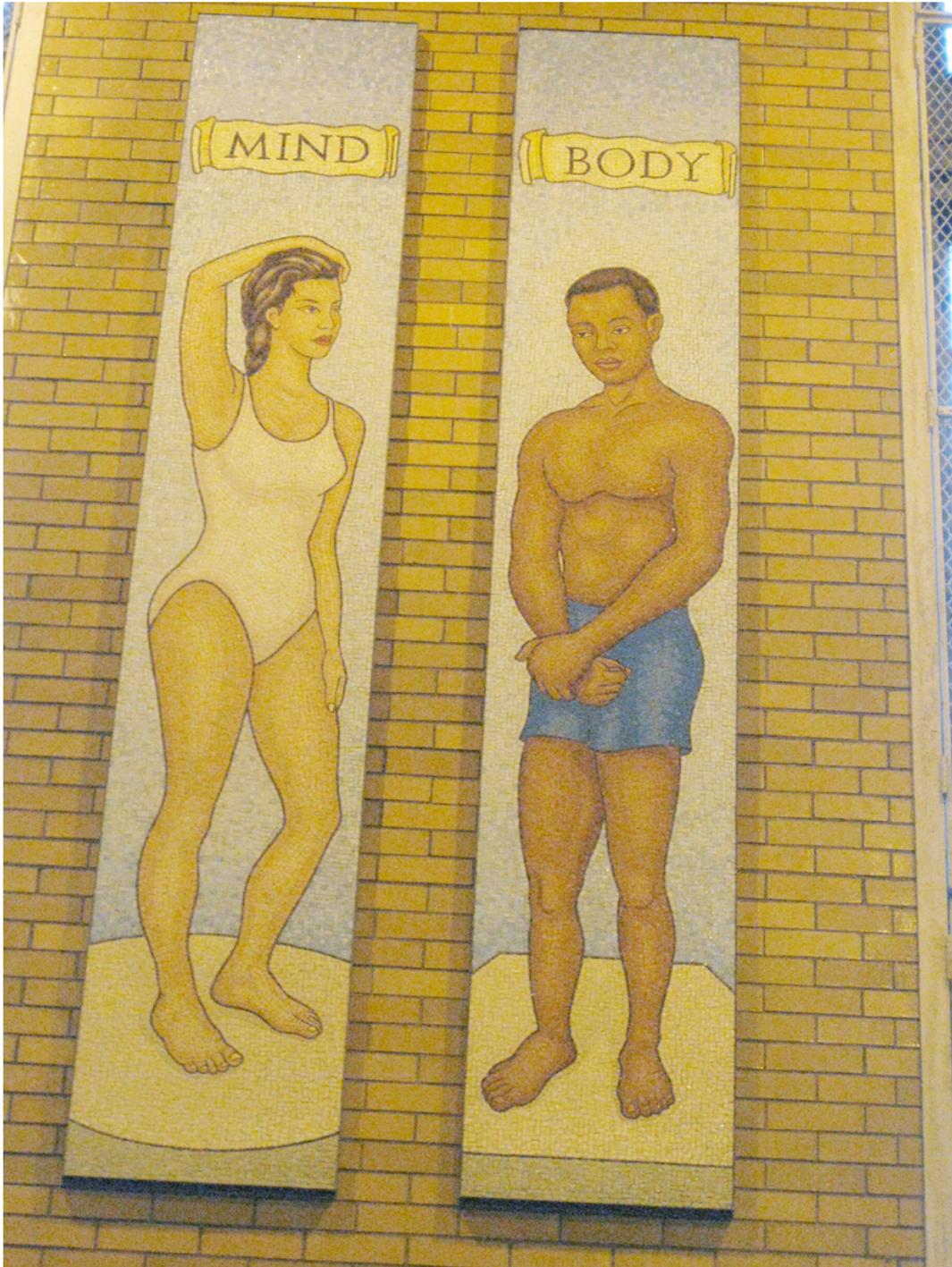
Bill and Mary Buchen
Sound Carnival, 1996
PS 244, Brooklyn, New York
Photograph by Mara Hoberman (2010)



Bill and Mary Buchen
Sound Carnival, 1996
PS 244, Brooklyn, New York
Photograph by Mara Hoberman (2010)



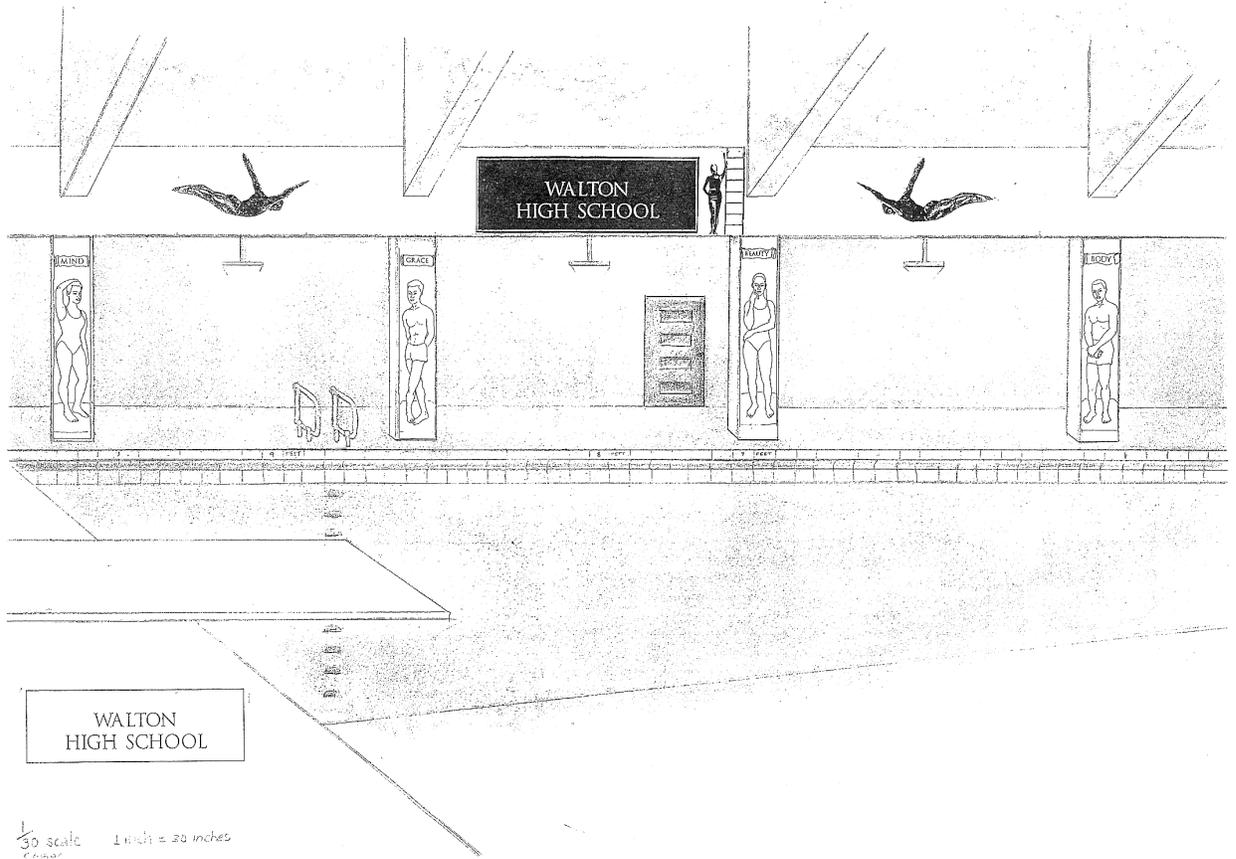
Isamu Noguchi and Julian Whittlesey
Model of United Nations playground, 1952



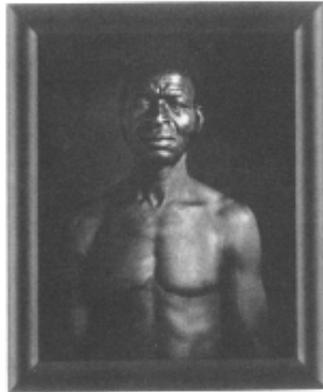
Carrie Mae Weems
Body, Mind, Health, Spirit (detail), 1999
Walton Educational Campus
Photograph by Mara Hoberman (2010)



Carrie Mae Weems
Body, Mind, Health Spirit (detail), 1999
Walton Educational Campus
Photograph by Mara Hoberman (2010)



Carrie Mae Weems
Sketch for *Body, Mind, Health, Spirit* (c. 1999)

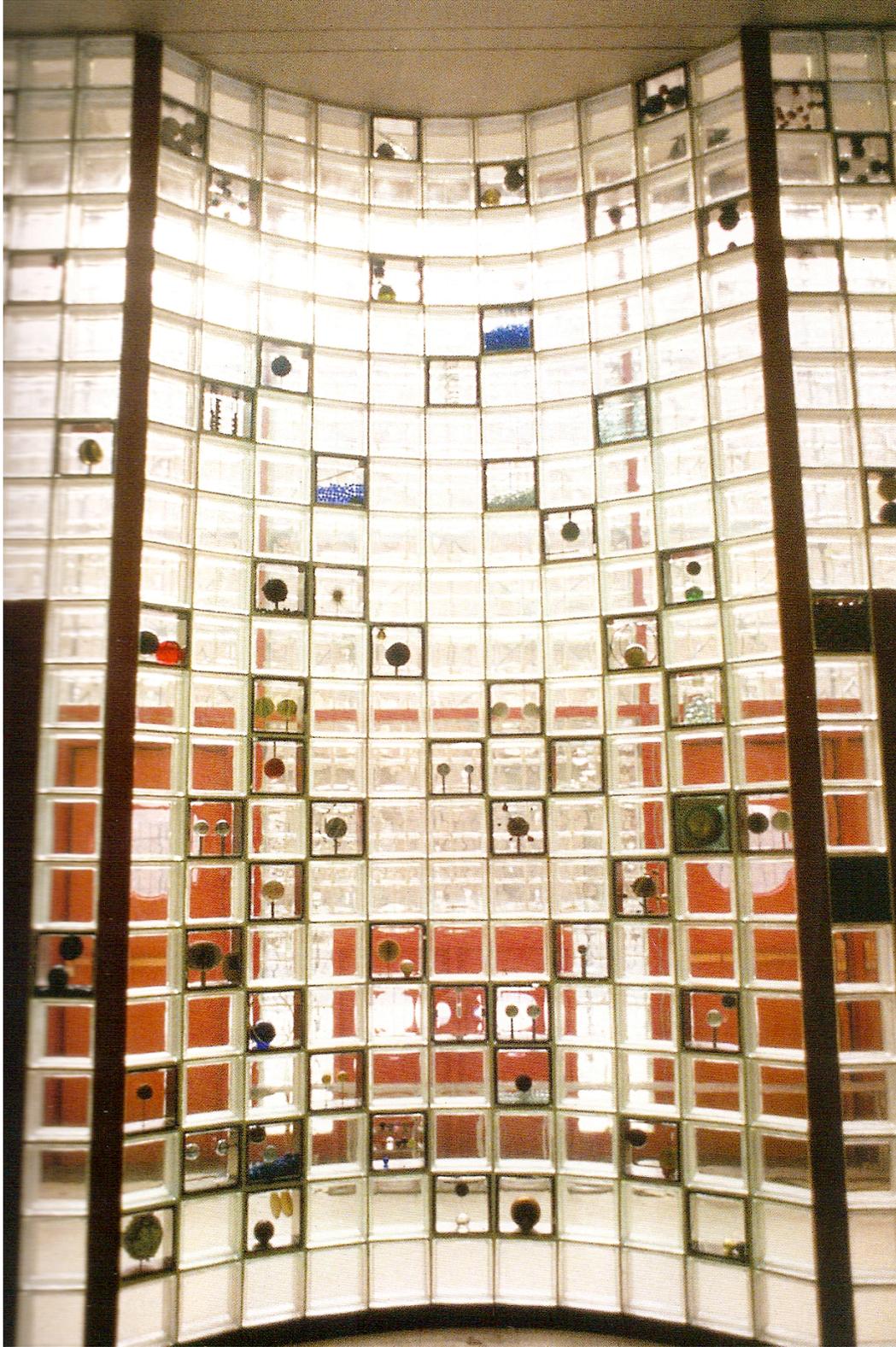


Carrie Mae Weems
"Sea Island Series," 1992
Three color prints: two panels
Courtesy of P.P.O.W, New York



Top:
John Ahearn
Raymond and Toby, 1991

Bottom:
John Ahearn
Bronx Sculpture Park, 1991
Photograph by Ari Marcopoulos, 1991



Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzel
Encylic, 2004
PS 102, Bronx, New York

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