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CONFERENCE EXPLORES PUBLIC-ART PROBLEMS

By RHODA M. GILINSKY NOV. 1, 1987

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One impetus for "Setting Sites: Process and Consensus in Public Art" was the museum's current exhibition of works by George Rickey, who has created public sculpture since 1955. "The popular vote on art is almost always wrong," said Mr. Rickey, the first of the conference's speakers. "If art depended on popular vote, we wouldn't have any."

The daylong conference at the Neuberger Museum looked at the issues raised

by public art from various perspectives: the legal and moral rights of the artist; the problems in collaborative efforts among artist, architect and landscape architect; the public's expectations and its right to review, reject or even destroy a commissioned work.

"Westchester is a region that is on the threshold of making decisions about public art," said Kevin Concannon, coordinator of public programs for the Neuberger Museum. "There is no coherent policy in Westchester about this and we felt the best service we could provide would be educating people on the issues." Mr. Rickey cited several problems he has confronted over the years. One is knowing who is in charge of the project - "Sometimes it is difficult to know with whom one is dealing," the sculptor said. "It could be the architect, the owner or the developer of the property." Another is the need for contracts to protect "the interests of both parties," he said, and to clarify such issues as the sculpture being the end product and not "raw material for Christmas cards, ash trays or logos."

The octogenarian artist also warned about the suitability of the site. "The sculptor should not accept any site offered," he said. "There must be harmony between the sculpture and the site."

A discussion of the moral rights of artists focused on the case of Anne and Patrick Poirier, who received a commission from the French Government to create a fountain for the Palais Royale in Paris. Their design was approved by the French Ministry of Culture in 1985, but a new Minister of Culture was elected last year and refused to allow their work to be placed at the site. The Poiriers have taken legal action and have solicited the aid of artists and museum directors in Europe and America in petitioning the French Government to install the sculpture in the original location.

Barbara Hoffman, a lawyer who is the chairwoman of the subcommittee on public art of the committee on art law for the Association of the Bar of the City of New York, explained that French law gives the author of an art work "the right to preserve the work from alteration or mutilation." This right of integrity, as it is called, has in the past been applied to the material integrity of the work. The Poirier case raises the question of whether it also applies to the relationship between the work and the site.

In the United States, one of the most publicized examples of a public monument has been the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, and the symposium included a panel discussion of the issues it raised. Dr. Shirley Blum, professor of art history at the Purchase college, presented a historical review of war monuments, from early Roman memorials to the use of walls inscribed with names, which she described as "an extended roll call or drum call."

Maya Lin, the designer of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, explained her design concept by saying: "In a lot of memorials people pretend that the pain is not there and there is a pretense that it never happened. It should be about not war but peace -and about people who have given their lives. It is a responsibility to people 100 years down the road who will look at it and ask as they see the names of the dead 'Is it worth it?' "

Her monument inspired public controversy from the beginning, according to Jan C. Scruggs, project coordinator of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. But it was selected from 1,421 entries for its simplicity and power, he said, and it was those qualities that inspired so much emotion on the part of the public.

The evolution of public art in recent years was addressed by Dr. Irving Sandler, professor of art history at the Purchase college, who drew a distinction between works of art in public places and public art. "Working in public places was unfamiliar to artists in America," Dr. Sandler observed. "Artists first adapted studio art to public sites. Until the 60's, there was no conception of the public artist in contrast to the studio artist."

Architects and artists on the design team for the Battery Park City/South Cove Project in Manhattan then discussed the complexities and challenges of collaborative efforts. On the panel were Amanda Burden, vice president of planning and design for the Battery Park City Authority; Nancy Rosen, an art consultant with the Fine Arts Planning Group; Susan Child, the design team landscape architect; Stanton Eckstut, the design-team architect, and Mary Miss, the design team artist.

Scott Burton, whose granite and marble sculptures often function as furniture in public spaces, spoke of the progression of art from "the art of thing, to art of place, to art of social place." By social place, he said he meant "an inhabited place -

a place where people go." Often, Mr. Burton suggested, only fine lines distinguish the public artist from the architect. For public artists, he urged "an ideal of impersonality that should be cultivated. We have to get rid of the notion of signature."

In planning the conference, Suzanne Delehanty, director of the Neuberger Museum, and Mr. Concannon established a citizens committee of Westchester and Connecticut residents who are knowledgeable and interested in issues of public art. The committee helped in planning the conference and served as a resource group.

"With public art to be truly public, there has to be public debate and public acceptance," said Susan Larkin of Greenwich, Conn., who served as chairman of the citizens committee. "The citizens committee is wide-ranging and includes an architect, an educator, a businessman, a veteran - people from all walks of life. It was quite deliberate to bring in people from different fields."

She added: "Currently a significant amount of money is being spent for public art, and there is pressure for more Holocaust and Vietnam memorials. We want to be sure we don't have unloved and unlovable objects plunked down somewhere, and we want the public to understand the issues so they can make informed decisions."

Camille Akeju, a printmaker and art historian from Mount Vernon and a member of the committee, said that problems arise when a public agency commissions an art work and then decides it doesn't like it. "The aftermath of that is that it creates a lot of nam Monument," she said. "Public officials have to know the commitment they are making."

Adele Greene, director of Westchester Public Art and a member of the committee, said she hoped that the conference would help people understand that "it's not just a piece of sculpture placed in front of a building but art that is integrated into our lives and which has to be incorporated into city planning." In areas of the country where there In areas of the country where there has been legislation providing for public art, the level of public art is higher, Miss Delehanty said. As a resident of Westchester whocares deeply about the arts, she added, she feels competitive and ambitious for this region. "I hope county officials will take a more active role in advancing the cause of public art," she said, "but the motivation

for them to act will have to come from the public."

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