



TOP LEFT BY CHRISTINE PODAS-LARSON

## Do You Really Want to Do That in Public?

Mary Tyler Moore on the Nicollet Mall. The Peanuts gang on parade in St. Paul. And now, brand-new works along the Hiawatha Rail Line. Will the real public art please stand up?

**MARY TYLER MOORE'S** famous tam toss, captured in a bronze statue unveiled in May 2002 on the Nicollet Mall in Minneapolis, is, to some observers, a metaphorical gesture of a liberated, independent woman taking the town by storm. To others, the \$55,000 statue, which was donated by the cable network that airs *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* reruns, is a commercial exploitation of public space, mocked in *City Pages* under the headline "More Public Art for the Red Bull and Doritos Set." Though they say you shouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth, some local arts activists wish the city would have climbed up on Mary's pedestal and checked out her teeth.

"Mary Tyler Moore is bad news for a number of reasons," says David Allen, art and design manager for Minneapolis's new Hiawatha Light Rail line. "I philosophically object to it as product placement. The city allowed a private entity to utilize and appropriate public space for their own enter-

prise. How different is it from having a can of Coke in a movie? In an urban environment, we're constantly assaulted by commercial messages. Public art is one of the few things—when it's true art—not aiming to get at your pocket-book. It's sad to see the medium corrupted. Where do you draw the line?"

Mary Altman, the city's public art administrator, responds to critics by agreeing that corporate sponsorship of public art, and the line between art and advertising, is an issue the city grapples with. Yet Altman believes the statue was valuable in determining standards for good public art. "Mary Tyler Moore got people talking about what kind of art the city should get behind," she says. "It contributed to the dialogue of what we want our city to be like. What

**St. Paul's Schubert Club bandshell; Mary Tyler Moore on Nicollet Mall; Mosaic of the Americas at Minneapolis's Resource Center of the Americas.**

are the values of the city? Who should we commemorate and honor? I'm glad it stimulated that dialogue. Plus, every time you go by, there's somebody getting their picture taken with it."

It is impossible to determine how many people have had their photograph taken at Eero Saarinen's St. Louis Gateway Arch, Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the Statue of Liberty, Mount Rushmore, or the Eiffel Tower. And it's hard to imagine how many more will do the same at Minnesota's biggest foray, by far, into public art: \$2 million worth of creations incorporated into the Hiawatha Light Rail line, scheduled to open this month. How does public art benefit communities? Why does public art matter? And what kind of return are we getting on our money?

**ALLEN STEPPED INTO HIS ROLE** at Metro Transit, which operates the light rail line, in the spring of 2000, a year into a series of community workshops Metro Transit initiated to help define the character of each rail station. Allen and his panel reviewed the work of 260 artists and winnowed the list to 16. He then matched artists with architects, who collaborated to design the stations and accompanying works of art.

Twelve of the Hiawatha stations are scheduled to open in April. Some have an urban look, with sleek lines of steel and glass; others feel more historic, using Arts and Crafts elements that echo the bungalow-style architecture of the adjacent neighborhoods. And then there's the art, most of it representational rather than abstract. With everything from an overhead model of a neighborhood made up of Sears catalog homes to interactive kiosks with audio and video clips to a contemplative bench, the themes and media are as diverse as the prospective rail riders. Allen feels confident the public will react favorably—but when it comes to public art, little is certain.

Though public art has been around for a long time, perhaps beginning with cave paintings, it still isn't easy to define. Jack Becker, artistic director of Forecast Public Artworks, a St. Paul nonprofit that funds public art projects and publishes the journal *Public Art Review*, says people typically think of public art as "the four m's: murals, monuments, memorials, and mime." Actually, he notes, public art can include temporary installations, performance art, soundscapes, and street theater: the *Quadriga* (golden horses) on the state capitol, the

## What's Good

Wing Young Huie's *Lake Street, USA*, is a series of 650 photographs of activity along Lake Street that was displayed along six miles of the street during the summer and fall of 2000.

"He helped bring to the surface the diversity of the communities on Lake Street and showed people like me who was there. He involved hundreds of businesses and people along Lake Street in the process. The records of images will last in our memories forever."

—Shelly Willis, University of Minnesota  
*Public Art on Campus program*

Peter Woytuk's 1,400-pound bulls, on the University of Minnesota's St. Paul campus, are loved so much by the public that they occasionally "wander" during the night. U of M public art coordinator Shelly Willis likes the public interaction, and wouldn't mind letting people move the bulls if it weren't for the risk of damage or the cost of moving them back.

"Good public art also plays with the memory of the experience. I am much more aware of the [surrounding] buildings, their function and their use, and the landscaping. Everything in my mind is much more vivid. Public art becomes a landmark, a place people return to, to appreciate art on its own terms."

—David Allen, *Hiawatha Light Rail*

Maya Lin's winter garden, with its wall of water and rolling hardwood floor, was installed in the foyer of the American Express building in downtown Minneapolis in 2002.

"It's mesmerizing, simple, and elegant. I love the piece."

—David Allen

Western Sculpture Park, located in the city's most densely populated neighborhood on the edge of downtown St. Paul, features a rotating exhibition of 20 large-scale outdoor sculptures.

"I love it because of the things that are in there and also what it's doing for the neighborhood. It's a motivator for social change."

—Christine Podas-Larson, *Public Art St. Paul*

## What's Bad

"My least favorite public artwork is the family of cartoonish bronze blobs that Brooklyn artist Tom Otterness installed outside the Federal Courts building opposite the Minneapolis City Hall. His irksome little figures lout about on shaggy mounds that are the remains of an expensive landscaping debacle. In the midst of the blob-critters stands a blob-giant who appears to have been made of Milk Duds or dog turds. This is a tedious exercise in cuteness that trivializes a courthouse plaza. If it were possible to move it, the piece might suit a school playground, where its whimsy, scale-shifts, and playful dumbness could enchant kids."

—Mary Abbe, *Star Tribune visual arts critic*

mosaic mural at Minneapolis's Resource Center of the Americas, Metro Transit's bus poetry, and 4th of July fireworks displays.

Public art, clearly, must be located in publicly accessible spaces, but Becker and his colleagues are quick to distinguish public art from art in public places. True public art is site-specific and may respond to the characteristics of the location: the physical environment—wind, sun, seasons—or the history, demographics, social issues, and concerns unique to a people and place. Artwork in public places (in its worst cases, nicknamed "plop art," as it seems to have been arbitrarily plopped somewhere) is not created with the space in mind. Over time, though, some of these works, or even pieces not conceived as art, such as northeast Minneapolis's Grain Belt Beer sign, can slowly become integrated into a site's identity.

Public dollars and public property are not necessarily characteristics of public art, either; in fact, many corporate projects, such as Maya Lin's winter garden in the foyer of the American Express building in Minneapolis, have become local favorites. Some public entities, such as the state government of Minnesota (including the University system), employ Percent for Art programs, which designate a percentage of construction costs toward artwork for the site. For instance, funding for the light rail's public art was a percentage of the dollars granted for the project by the Federal Transit Administration. But private money plays a significant role, particularly in the Twin Cities.

"One thing people don't realize is that the majority of public art in the Twin Cities is privately funded," says Becker, who lists individual donors, foundations, corporations, and churches as common funding sources. He admits there are gray areas between the public and private realms. "Are architectural buildings public art?" he asks. "The Target building [in downtown Minneapolis]? Is that art? Is it architecture? Ornamentation? The changing display of light—I'd call it public art. Does Target think so? What is the intention?"

The common denominator is that public art interacts with an environment and a diverse, changing audience. "It connects with audiences who aren't necessarily arts audiences," Becker says. With public art—downtown Minneapolis's artist-designed manhole covers, for example—the audience is not

necessarily seeking an art experience, as in a museum or gallery. The public artist seeks to engage an audience.

In addition, museum or gallery pieces are often viewed only once, for a few moments, whereas a public work may be viewed thousands of times and needs to reveal itself over time to stay interesting and relevant. This challenge, coupled with time commitments (a typical project takes three to five years), community interaction, liability con-

assets"), cautious arts administrators are wont to use an inclusive democratic process, which can create both healthy and harmful friction between the artist and the public.

Armajani's work, which includes collaborations with architect Cesar Pelli in two Minneapolis skyways, tends to be loosely informed by local residents, and the artist speaks frankly about public input. Too much, he says, can frustrate artists and create works that,

age people to come and participate," he says. "But the idea that the artist is responsible for pleasing the community is a big responsibility and not realistic. It's important that you state to the community right from the beginning, and over and over, that the artist is not going to be able to incorporate every idea and please every person."

**THE NIGHT OF MARCH 15, 1989**, was perhaps public art's darkest. After a



tracts, safety concerns, and material restrictions, contributes to the myriad of daunting unknowns. Becker believes the process of creating a public artwork is more similar to community theater than studio art. "Public art is a big experiment," he says, "putting art out there and not knowing what to expect or how people will respond." Allen cuts to the chase: "Making public art is not for the faint of heart."

When Siah Armajani, an Iranian immigrant who has become the Twin Cities' best known public artist, created the Irene Hixon Whitney Bridge between the Walker Art Center and Loring Park, his "client" was, collectively, the Walker, the city of Minneapolis, the Minnesota Department of Transportation, the federal government (I-94, spanned by the bridge, is a federal highway), and the Minneapolis Park Board. This assembly, while somewhat cumbersome, isn't atypical. With permanent public artworks being so, well, public, and with so much at stake (Altman describes it as "giving away the city's

in trying to please everyone, reflect the lowest common denominator of compromise. "To be honest with you, I don't enjoy [public art] that much. I get many, many requests. Out of every 100, I might accept one.... Public art is not an ice cream social. [An artist] cannot sit in a community where everyone says, 'I want this and I want that.' Good public art is based on needs rather than tastes. It's a social mission to bring art where the people are."

Becker maintains that it's important for the local community to be involved in the artistic process and the shaping of public space. "Buildings get built and people have no say. The process can be a very effective way to include people...to stimulate conversation and confront people with issues they wouldn't otherwise address."

Allen admits that meeting attendance and public involvement varies, and that it's unrealistic to think a public artwork can or should democratically reflect the community. "You do the best you can to invite and encour-

**LEFT: The Skygate sculpture in St. Paul** taught public artists that stainless steel is no match for Minnesota weather. **RIGHT: Bulls on the University of Minnesota's St. Paul campus** are almost too well-loved.

hearing instigated by public complaints, New York City federal workers cut Richard Serra's 12-foot high, 120-foot long *Tilted Arc* into three pieces, removed it from the Federal Plaza, and hauled it off to a scrap metal yard. Though Minnesota's public art administrators haven't experienced such drastic failures, they still deal with their share of difficulties imposed by our extreme climate, financial constraints, and public concern.

Successful projects tend to have similar characteristics: public participation in creating or inspiring the work, aesthetic beauty or visual engagement, and—especially when the city's funding it, Altman notes—they have to make practical financial sense. "It has to be durable and sustainable in the public realm, through temperature

extremes, salt, attention—people touching it, dogs peeing on it. It has to last.” Often it’s difficult to conduct long-term tests on new materials and techniques, which has created problems for many projects. The wood used for Minneapolis’s *Green Chair* project warped and disintegrated prematurely; *Skygate*, the stainless steel sculpture in St. Paul’s Ecolab Plaza, began to rust less than a year after its installation; and *Drumlins*, the collection of

of the scaffolding Michael Graves designed for the Washington Monument was rejected by neighbors, who were concerned about preserving green space and that ever-present art-and-advertising line.

For many arts administrators, the city of St. Paul’s “Peanuts on Parade” statues crossed that line. Becker dubs them “cause-related lawn ornaments” but acknowledges that he thinks they have value as entry points for people

tral Station in New York—they’re cathedrals, built so public transportation was a pleasurable experience. Public art makes a place become familiar. It makes people feel comfortable and instills a sense of pride and ownership.”

“Public art strengthens people’s affection for the community, which is something that’s hard to put your finger on,” says Christine Podas-Larson, president of Public Art St. Paul, which oversees the Schubert Club’s band-

LEFT BY DEBORAH WHITEHOUSE RIGHT BY CHRIS FAUST



**LEFT:** Maya Lin’s *the character of a hill, under glass* is an urban oasis in downtown Minneapolis. **RIGHT:** Tom Otterness’s sculptures, collectively known as *Rockman*, frolic on Martha Schwartz’s landscaped *Drumlins*.

earth mounds in the plaza of the U.S. Courthouse in downtown Minneapolis, has proved difficult to maintain. Administrators are now bringing conservators on board from the beginning to evaluate and prepare works for maintenance and repair. “I’m not experimenting any more. I’m encouraging artists to use proven materials and construction techniques,” Allen says wistfully.

As always, there is a constant weighing of resources versus benefits. A towering Isamu Noguchi sculpture proposed for downtown Minneapolis in the early ’80s was dropped because it was too expensive; north Minneapolis’s *Celebration of Life* mural was destroyed in 2001—rather than removed, which would have been costly—when the site was redeveloped. In 1999, Target’s proposed installation in Fair Oaks Park

who haven’t had much exposure to art. “I have issues with the whole Peanuts thing,” he says. “But artists got paid, and the city didn’t pay money for it—they probably made money. It raised awareness of public art, and any conversation regarding public art is better than none.”

Allen rolls his eyes at the mention of the subject. “I can’t read *Peanuts* anymore,” he says, and notes that, ironically, his first task at Metro Transit was to commission an artist to design MTC’s Snoopy sculpture. “From my perspective, people like me need to keep their distance from stuff like that. It’s fine; it’s a positive thing, but let’s just not get it confused with what we’re doing in terms of public art.”

**THE PUBLIC ART ALLEN OVERSEES** for the Hiawatha Light Rail will, he hopes, encourage people to ride the trains. “Public art makes the place more interesting and inviting,” he says. “It tells people we’re attentive to them. Look at places like Grand Cen-



shell on Raspberry Island, Western Sculpture Park, and more. “This is our civic home,” Podas-Larson adds. “Think of your home with completely bare walls, with nothing of interest that delighted you or made you stop and think. Public art expresses the affection that people truly do have for the cities in which they live. Sometimes it’s simply interesting, or beautiful, or witty, or functional, or it tells a story, or teaches a lesson, but it makes the public realm better and richer for all of us.”

Shelly Willis, coordinator of the University of Minnesota’s Public Art on Campus program, puts the art in perspective. “Start thinking about why you live, and what’s important about your life,” she says. “You have to have food, water, shelter, and all that. But do you read, look at films, listen to music? All these things contribute to reasons for living, and so does public art. Public art has this unique ability to identify us now and in the future. Otherwise everything would be generic—McDonald’s, strip malls. Art says,

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## The Arts

“This is who we are.”

If public art is difficult to define, it's even more difficult to evaluate. When people aren't responding to art in museums and galleries, attendance and sales go down. But with public art, criteria are more subjective. And public art's future seems as debatable as the merits of St. Paul's Peanuts gang. Last session, the Minnesota Legislature put a \$100,000 cap on the Percent for Art program and cut the State Arts Board's budget, which forced the state to lay off its public art administrator. Meanwhile, in a surprise move this winter, President George Bush gave the National Endowment for the Arts its largest increase in 20 years.

Ultimately, public art is not driven by funders and administrators, but by the creative élan of artists. Most public artists working today got their start by apprenticing with other artists, but Becker predicts that degree programs in public art will grow from a handful to 50 nationally within 10 years.

And as cities expand outward, suburban communities struggling to define their character will likely top cities in investing in public art. The most visible of these projects will be found in new sculpture parks and libraries, but temporary works, too, such as festivals and performances, will prove low-cost ways to test concepts and establish ideas for permanent works.

In the bigger picture, committing to the art associated with the Hiawatha Light Rail is similar to committing to light rail itself. It is a move toward community interaction and shared public space—away from gated communities and the isolation of individual agendas. Committing to public art says we believe social interaction and collaboration are valuable, necessary even, to human culture. We cannot forget, Becker notes, that art can be an economic development tool; in the past four years, the Peanuts statues have generated an estimated \$150 million in revenue for the city of St. Paul. And to this, we can all toss our tams. **MM**

**Rachel Hutton** is associate editor of *Minnesota Monthly*.

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