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The Intersection of Public Art and Arts Education

Posted by [Mr. Jeff M. Poulin](#)

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Across the country, the arts are changing: demographics are shifting, modes of artistic participation are becoming more diverse, and once segmented artistic practices are converging. These changes ring true for both public art and arts education, and over the past year these respective fields have been discussing their convergence.

The Public Art and Arts Education Programs at Americans for the Arts endeavor to explore this intersection, better understand the potential for collaborations, and create tools and resources for encouraging inter-sector cooperation.

As a first step, we have begun to research the shared space. There is an inherent connection between the intrinsic goals of both areas of artistic study and practice.



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Public art and arts education have been collaborating informally throughout the past several decades, however as we move towards more formalized practices, the professionalization of both fields, and the siloed funding structures, it is vital to explicitly explore modes of integration and examples of best practices that can inform both arts professionals and decisions makers.

Public Art

According to Americans for the Arts' Public Art Network, public art stimulates learning and thought about art and society, about our interconnected lives, and about the social sphere as a whole. The learning process is facilitated through both the method of creating public artwork and the life of the work once installed. In order to develop an effective public artwork it is essential to learn about the history and culture of the site location. Additionally, once the artwork is complete, those interacting with the piece can learn from it as a community identifier and use it as a means to develop a deeper understanding of both the location and people around it.

Relevant to education, The University of Washington's report bases the definition on the impact of public art on the specific locale:

"Public art comprises a vast and multidimensional urban typology, which ranges from objects placed in a site, to site-based works, to more ephemeral and performative works that explore dynamic processes, artistic, and biological. As such, public art can serve to provoke profound changes in both the mental and physical environment, often mediating the real and/or perceived divide between cultural aesthetics and ecological function."

In relation to public art in public schools, [Jack Becker](http://www.americansforthearts.org/sites/default/files/pdf/2013/by_program/networks_and_councils/public_art_network/PublicArtMonograph_JBecker.pdf) (http://www.americansforthearts.org/sites/default/files/pdf/2013/by_program/networks_and_councils/public_art_network/PublicArtMonograph_JBecker.pdf) highlights the significance in distinguishing between public art - which takes into account its site and other contextual issues - and art in public places. Simply placing a sculpture in a school is not the same as designing a sculpture specifically for that site by considering its audience, environmental conditions, the history of the site, etc. So, how can public art be created to achieve its goals within an educational context?

Arts Education

Arts Education leader, [Anne Bamford](http://www.amazon.com/Public-Art-Schools-Michele-Cohen/dp/1580932150) (<http://www.amazon.com/Public-Art-Schools-Michele-Cohen/dp/1580932150>), described arts education as being present in virtually all countries in the world (irrespective of economic status or development), yet the definition of 'arts education' is widely disputed on an international scale. In a review completed in 2013 by an international coalition of arts education research organizations, there are several definitions and purposes for arts and cultural education. In Hungary, for example, policies speak to the purpose of arts education being to educate future artists. In Germany, on the other hand, they speak to the importance of arts education for economic development, social inclusion and benefits to the obligatory education system.

Within the United States, it is widely accepted that a child's education is not complete unless it includes the arts. However, according to a 2011 national [survey](http://artsactionfund.org/page/-/AAF/Learn/ArtsEdStatement.pdf) (<http://artsactionfund.org/page/-/AAF/Learn/ArtsEdStatement.pdf>) by the Farkas Research Group, schools are narrowing their curriculum and 66% of surveyed teachers said that other subjects – like the arts - are 'crowded out' by

the attention placed on math or language arts. Additionally, access to quality arts education is challenged by equity across a number of spectrums including socio-economic status, demographics, and geographic location.

Though much of arts education reform is based around curriculum, standards, and graduation requirements, there is robust research and exceptional examples which dictate the space for public art within the arts education sector to work collaboratively to achieve academic and social goals.

The Intersection of Public Art and Arts Education

Beginning with ancient Greek and Roman cities, public art has a long history. Within the United States, public art, as a field, began to emerge with the American Renaissance in the 19th century, and was developed into a professionalized field after WWI. Especially during Roosevelt's presidency, the federal government – and, in turn, state governments – began supporting public art through the Works Progress Administration, the Federal Arts Project, and the Section of Fine Arts, which placed art in federal buildings like post offices, libraries, and *schools*. Section of Fine Arts also began the federal support of the Percent for Art program, which allocated a percentage (usually 1%) of the cost of a building towards its aesthetics and art displays. This sparked a movement, were many cities – and some states - began adopting a similar policy like Baltimore, San Francisco, and Philadelphia (being the first!).

Take for example the case of Public Art in New York City's Public Schools from Michele Cohen's book [Public Art for Public Schools](http://www.amazon.com/Public-Art-Schools-Michele-Cohen/dp/1580932150) (<http://www.amazon.com/Public-Art-Schools-Michele-Cohen/dp/1580932150>):

“As the public education system developed in America, decoration of schools held little importance. However, beginning with a series of lectures on the topic in 1857, John Ruskin, believed that learning should take place in stimulating and attractive environments. Small societies developed to support this philosophy by placing reproductions of well known pieces in the public schools of New York City. As with the growth of public art, the U.S. Commission of Education outlined goals in its 1897 report:

1. Art 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 arts patrons, and furthermore, when taste is instilled at an early age, American citizens will demand improved design.”

Within NYC, the movement continued with the installation of murals, stained glass, and more – all which continued through the great depression until the New Deal. With the shifting economics and divergent immigrant populations of the city, many programs existed through various initiatives and became formally institutionalized with the integration of a Percentage for Art program specifically for the public school system in 1983.

Where to go from here?

As we embark on the exploration of this shared space, it begs the question: How do we further collaborate as public artists and arts educators? Where are the intersections in our work? What is the shared language?

As we move forward to further explore the intersections between public art and arts education, we hope that you can join us. In the next few months, there are two opportunities to participate and learn more. On **Wednesday, May 27** at 3:00pm EST, tune in for a [webinar](http://www.americansforthearts.org/events/webinars/current-trends-in-public-art-3-public-art-arts-education?delta=0) (<http://www.americansforthearts.org/events/webinars/current-trends-in-public-art-3-public-art-arts-education?delta=0>) with experts from the field of public art and arts education who will discuss this topic. Similarly, on **Saturday, June 13** at the Americans for the Arts' **Annual Convention** (<http://convention.artsusa.org/>), there is a discussion session titled, "[What Is the Connection between Public Art and Education?](http://convention.artsusa.org/schedule/session/description/what-connection-between-public-art-and-education)" (<http://convention.artsusa.org/schedule/session/description/what-connection-between-public-art-and-education>)" where we'll continue the conversation.

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1 responses for The Intersection of Public Art and Arts Education

[Rey Antonio Duran](#)
 [\(https://www.facebook.com/reyantdurpainting\)](https://www.facebook.com/reyantdurpainting) says

May 22, 2015 at 12:07 am

I have always thought about art, as a catalyst, education motorize among young people and focus them to take their targets and ideals, as long as we get the tools to his environment, their neighborhood.
 I will be a fan. Artist, and they will be contributing to improve the natural appearance of physical space.

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A forum for today's leading arts professionals sharing their knowledge, thoughts and comments on the topics shaping the arts in our communities, schools and nation.

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