

BACKGROUND

A city's collection of public art functions as a de facto outdoor museum. Removals of numerous works of public art, including monuments, from public spaces worldwide raise questions about the death of public art, and how society is rethinking the "outside museum". Though many scholars suggest frameworks for the creation of public art and for consideration of the public in the commissioning of public art, not as much attention has been paid to the removal, decommissioning, or death of public art. What does it mean for public art to die? How do decisions to remove public art from public spaces occur? What factors influence these choices? What happens to public art when it is removed?

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Through this research we seek to explore:

1. What is Public Art?
2. What does it mean for Public Art to "die"?
3. How do different types of "death" intersect with different kinds of public art?
4. How does evolving knowledge about the history of subjects and artists involved in works of public art influence the death of public art in current times?

METHODS

This research examines what happened to works of public art that have been removed from public spaces in the city of Philadelphia. Using data from one of America's oldest cities and largest collections of public art as a foundation, the study seeks to develop a foundational understanding of what happens to public art at the end of its life.

Existing inventories of public art in Philadelphia from six publicly available datasets are being coded by type (public art, memorial, and/or monument) and current status (standing, in storage, missing, moved). Works that are no longer publicly available are then being further coded to identify patterns of removal (death).

The Tipping Point

Recent events have led to more visible public involvement and influence in the life and death of public art in communities. While there is modern global precedent for crowd-influenced statue removal (see: 2015 #RhodesMustFall movement in Cape Town, South Africa) the protest events following the 2020 murder of George Floyd by police appear to have been a watershed moment for public involvement in the fate of public art in the United States.



Christopher Columbus Monument boxed in Marconi Plaza Philadelphia PA (June 2020)
 Photo Credit: N Giovannucci can be reused under the CC-BY 4.0 license



Statue of Thorfinn Karlsefni, installed in Fairmount Park in 1920 and submerged in the Schuylkill River by activists in 2018. Photo Credit: Michael W. Murphy, (2009) Can be shared and adapted under the CC-BY 2.0 license

HYPOTHESES:

1. There are multiple definitions of public art, dependent on context.
 - 2a. Public art experiences a death when it is no longer available to the public at its original site or able to be viewed as intended by its artist(s) and/or commissioner(s).
 - Placed in Storage
 - "Disappeared"
 - Relocated or Sold
 - Re-contextualized
 - Destroyed in Conflict
 - Removed by the Public (Civic Action)
 - Natural Causes
 - 2b. There is more than one way for public art to die:
3. Monuments are recently experiencing more death by civic action than other forms of public art.
4. Knowledge about the history of subjects and artists involved in works of public art is leading to more visible public involvement and influence in the life and death of public art in communities.

CONSIDERATIONS & SCOPE

The researchers wish to acknowledge that the term "public art" is one with a wide array of possible meanings and interpretations, which have been limited here for the purposes of this study. Types of public art that the researchers have chosen to exclude from this study are:

- guerrilla art/street art (such as graffiti or yarnbombing)
- temporary art (such as pop-ups or performances)
- murals (including Philadelphia's Mural Arts Program)

The purpose of this exclusion is to begin the coding process and test the initial hypotheses. The researchers desire to broaden their dataset (in Philadelphia and beyond) in future study.

The study is also limited by the availability of data on public art in Philadelphia. There is currently no comprehensive database of public art in Philadelphia, which makes this type of research difficult. For this reason, we have created a composite dataset from six publicly available indexes of public art produced by public and institutional sources. These lists are each limited in scope, and together still do not include all possible works of art that could be considered public art in Philadelphia.

The lists of public art in Philadelphia used in this study include:

- Art, Sculpture, & Monuments (Philadelphia Parks & Recreation)¹
- Association for Public Art (aPA)²
- Inventory of American Sculpture (Smithsonian)³
- List of Public Art in Philadelphia (Wikipedia)⁴
- National Monument Survey (Monument Lab)⁵
- Philadelphia Public Art (@philart.net)⁶

¹ <https://www.pasda.psu.edu/uci/DataSummary.aspx?dataset=7011>
² <https://www.associationforpublicart.org/explore/public-art/>
³ <https://siris-artinventories.si.edu/>
⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_public_art_in_Philadelphia
⁵ <https://monumentlab.github.io/national-monument-audit/app/docs.html>
⁶ <https://www.philart.net/>

CONTACT

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