



Does Public Art Have to Be Bad Art?

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When Public Art Goes Bad: Two Competing Features of Public Art

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Abstract: Not all public art is bad art, but when public art is bad, it tends to be bad in an identifiable way. In this paper, I develop a Waltonian theory of the category of public art, according to which public art standardly is both accessible to the public and minimally site-specific. When a work lacks the standard features of the category to which it belongs, appreciators tend to perceive the work as aesthetically flawed. I then compare and contrast cases of successful and unsuccessful public art to show that accessibility and site-specificity are features which tend to preclude the other. It is difficult, although hardly impossible, for a site-specific work to remain accessible, and difficult for an accessible work to engage adequately with the site on which it is situated. As a result, while not all public art is bad, the features peculiar to public work encourage a latent tendency toward badness.

Keywords: art; aesthetics; categories of art; public art; monuments; memorials; philosophy of art

1 Introduction

Ask someone what they think of public art, and odds are very good, if my own conversations are representative, that they'll assert that all public art is bad. Ask a follow-up, and odds are also very good that they'll mention Serra's *Tilted Arc* as an example par excellence of why all public art is awful.¹ A further moment's reflection, however, will call to mind the works of public art, both famous and obscure, that are beloved. Some, such as Gerz and Shalev-Gerz's *Monument Against Fascism*, are arguably works of genius.²

To *Monument Against Fascism*, we could add many other works of public art that succeed: Lin's *Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall*³, a black gash of sorrow and meaning; Kapoor's *Cloud Gate*⁴, its mirrored mercury-like surface reflecting the mercurial cityscape; and, many others. If architectural façades count as public art, then the exteriors of many buildings would also serve as examples of good, even great, public art.

So much, then, for the claim that public art is *always* bad. Nevertheless, a lot of public art is bad, and astonishingly so. We can't escape it. Moreover, public art seems *prone* to badness in ways that other works of art are not.⁵ Bad public art can be bad in many ways. It may be incongruous with its surroundings, or kitschy, or twee, or badly executed. A full treatment of the ways in which public art can be bad lies beyond the scope of the known universe. So let's shift the question slightly: why does public art so often wind up bad?

1 Serra, *Tilted Arc*.

2 Gerz and Shalev-Gerz, *Monument Against Fascism*.

3 Lin, *Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall*.

4 Kapoor, *Cloud Gate*.

5 We may adhere to Sturgeon's Law: 90% of everything is crap. The difference is that when contemplating public art, we *expect* that it will be crap.

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In this paper, I will argue that the characteristic badness of public art often results from the difficulty in satisfying two of the desiderata of public art: its *accessibility* and its *site-specificity*. Artworks that are maximally accessible regularly fail to be site-specific, and artworks that succeed in site-specificity often fail to be accessible. In section II, I will use the Waltonian framework of categories of art to develop a working theory of public art according to which accessibility and site-specificity are standard features of the category. In section 3, I will consider the 2007 and 2014 violin performances of Joshua Bell to expand the concept of accessibility to include epistemic qualities. Then I will argue that while accessibility and site-specificity are not necessarily opposed, the attempt to maximize one quality often comes at the expense of the other. Balancing accessibility and site-specificity is difficult, and works that do so successfully are often extraordinary.

2 The category of public art

As a term, ‘public art’ is often left undefined, and in most circumstances, there is no need to define it rigorously because we know more or less what it is. Public art is artwork that is in the public sphere, where the general public can encounter it. It is typically contrasted with art that is displayed in a museum, where patrons must pay fees and decide affirmatively to encounter art by going to a museum. Public facilitates unplanned encounters. If one ambled through Central Park in the late winter of 2005, one would experience Christo’s saffron *The Gates*, whether one had intended to experience the artwork that day, or if one was simply planning to take a stroll in the park.⁶

To explain why public art so often goes bad, we must move beyond intuitions and consider public art as a Waltonian *category of art*. The aesthetic properties of a work of art, according to Walton, not only supervene on its non-aesthetic properties, but on how we understand the category to which the work belongs. A category of art defines the non-aesthetic properties that are *standard*, *contraststandard*, and *variable* for members of the category. Standard features are those which are typical for the category, and which all members in the category would generally have. Contraststandard properties are those which are atypical for the category, and for which the presence of the property in the artwork would tend to disqualify the work from membership in that category. Finally, some properties are *variable* within a category, in that the category does not prescribe or proscribe the property for members of that category.⁷

The categories are a guide to appreciation and criticism, not rules or guides for artists. The aesthetic character of artworks is determined in part by the category to which they correctly belong, and artworks can belong to more than one category. For Walton, what we perceive depends in part on how we conceive of the artwork. For example, Baroque pieces that are commonly performed on piano were often originally written for the harpsichord, an instrument that cannot produce sustained sounds. It is a standard feature of Baroque piano performances that they should be performed without heavy pedaling. Perceiving a performance as a performance of a Baroque work draws our attention to the pedaling, and if the player relies heavily on the pedal to create a flowing and legato line, her performance will be perceived as aesthetically flawed. The pedaling may not rise to an aesthetic flaw, however, if the performance is experienced simply as a performance of *music commonly performed on the piano*.

Two further features of Walton’s theory of the categories of art are notable for our purposes. First, Walton’s standard features should not be read as sufficient and necessary conditions for membership in the category. Lacking a standard feature tends to disqualify a work from membership in a category, but there is a marked amount of flexibility within categories of art. Works may correctly belong to a category even if they lack some of the standard features of the category. To expand upon Walton’s example, paintings are standardly two dimensional, but a painting that incorporated a slight three-dimensionality, perhaps from a curved canvas, would likely be correctly appreciated as a painting.⁸

⁶ Christo and Jeanne-Claude, *The Gates*.

⁷ Walton, “Categories of Art”, 339.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 340.

Second, the properties of the category must be perceptible to the appreciator of the artwork, for appreciators perceive works as belonging to categories. For example, the history or origin of the artwork will not qualify as a property of a category of art, nor will the artist's intentions, unless they have been made perceptible to the appreciators of the artwork. A placard or title would count as a property of an abstract work, but the knowledge that the artist was inspired (say) by the shattering of his favorite water-pitcher would not.

We should be careful to distinguish the reasons that a work of art is the way it is from the standard features of the category to which the work belongs. To return to the previous example: it is standard, when performing Baroque music on the piano, to minimize the use of the pedal. The *reason* it is standard to minimize the use of the pedal is that many Baroque works that are commonly performed on the piano were originally written for instruments which do not play sustained tones. The *standard*, however, lies not in the historical facts, but in the production of clean, somewhat detached notes. This distinction will be important as we continue.

So, if there is a category of public art, then it will, among other things, provide a framework for the evaluation of public art. But an objection immediately presents itself. Public art is often thought of and written about as if it is in opposition to artwork that is in a museum. Yet many would be dubious that there is a useful category of *museum art* such that artworks could be appreciated as museum art, rather than as paintings or sculptures. So we might object that, in general, *where* an artwork is placed is immaterial to its appreciation. The location of a work of art typically does not matter much to its appreciation or evaluation.

I agree that is no salient category of *museum art*. There could be; the property *being displayed in a museum* is perceptible, and arguably *being in a museum* affects appreciator's aesthetic experience of a work if only by presenting the artwork as a worthy object of aesthetic contemplation. Appreciators could, though they haven't, decide that *being in a museum* is a standard property of the category *museum art*, and evaluate works based on whether they are in museums.⁹ We could categorize by the museum, but there's no obvious reason why we should.

I disagree, however, that the location of an artwork is immaterial to its appreciation in general. It is reasonable to suppose that religious artwork viewed in a museum, as part of a collection organized by era, technique, and subject would evoke one set of aesthetic responses, but the same religious artwork viewed in a chapel would evoke a different set of responses, and license different aesthetic engagement with the work. Some categories of art include the location of the work as a standard feature of the work, and others do not.

Here is one reason to think that the location of the artwork is a standard within the category of public art. Like museum art, public art can take many different forms. Sculptures and murals are often cited as examples, but dance and musical performances can also be public. Nevertheless, something seems to unify public art that would not unify them if they were merely held in a museum. Perhaps the difference lies with curation. In a museum, I expect that the work I encounter will be curated, and that the category that guides the curation will be much a better guide to aesthetic appreciation than the mere fact that it is in a museum. Appreciating public art, however, seems to require appreciating how it interacts with the space around it.

What is distinctive of the category of public art? We might begin by theorizing that public art is art that is displayed in a publicly-owned space, understanding 'displayed' broadly, to encompass more than the visual arts. A musical performance of street musicians, if it is an artwork, is a work of public art, and counts as displayed. So is the artwork created by dancers, flash mobs, and so forth.

But this definition won't do. While standard features of categories of art pick out tendencies, rather than necessary and sufficient conditions, there are simply too many works of public art that are exhibited in spaces that are privately-owned for 'publicly-owned' to capture what we care about. In 2017, artist Jeff Koons inflated a 45-foot-tall vinyl balloon statue of a demure and dainty dancer in Rockefeller Plaza. *Seated Ballerina* appears to be a work of public art, as crowds of people freely encounter it as they move about the plaza. Yet Rockefeller Plaza is not publicly-owned space, despite a longstanding tradition of permitting access to the public.¹⁰

⁹ The more cynical among us may argue that we already in fact do so.

¹⁰ Koons, *Seated Ballerina*.

Rockefeller Plaza is not unique. Many areas that are accessible to the public are owned by private individuals or by corporations, and there is often no visual cue to suggest to the pedestrian that she has crossed from public to privately owned property. Recall, however, that standard features of categories of art must be perceptible. If appreciators cannot perceive reliably that they are in a publicly-owned space, then we would expect that they could not appreciate public art as *public art*. On the contrary, people can appreciate and criticize *Seated Ballerina* without realizing that the ground on which they stand is owned by Tishman Speyer.

Moreover, artwork that is situated on private land often interacts with the public. Consider, for example, the giant praying hands that rise over the entrance to Oral Roberts University.¹¹ *Praying Hands* sits entirely on the property of the university, a private institution, but they are visible from the nearby road. So they are visible from publicly accessible space without being public property, and the public can interact with them aesthetically without physically sharing public space. Consequently, whether the work is on publicly- or privately-owned land will be obscure or irrelevant, so surprisingly, “displayed in a publicly owned space” cannot be a standard property of the category public art.

It seems plausible, however, that ownership functions as a useful proxy for the *accessibility* of an artwork. A work is accessible to the general public if there are no barriers preventing the general public from appreciating it aesthetically. Works that are restricted because only certain members of the public are permitted to see them, such as when an artwork is displayed in a museum with a high fee, are not public artworks.

A work that was inaccessible because of its location would not be a work of public art either, even if it lay on public property. Imagine a work of spray-painted art concealed on the underside of a bridge, visible only to those intrepid souls who dare to climb among the supports until they can spot it. Even knowing about the work would require specialized knowledge, membership in a secret group of artistic treasure hunters. The work may well be a work of art, but it would not be a work of public art, because the public would not ordinarily interact with it.

Accessibility, rather than public location, is a standard feature of the category of public art. Works that are accessible to the public tend to be included in the category of public art, and inaccessible works tend to be disqualified from the category of public art.

What other standard features of public art might there be? Imagine that a truck carrying a marble cherub breaks down just shy of the museum service entrance, in the middle of a crowded square. The harried workers clumsily unload the statue, and it falls to the sidewalk, its crate breaking like an eggshell. Miraculously, it is undamaged; even more miraculously, it lands in such a way that it looks briefly, before the workers clear it away, as if it had been installed on the street. Yet it is not a work of public art. It remains an artwork that is part of the world of museums and collectors, and intuitively, its brief interlude on the street was not a brief installation of a work of public art.

We might be inclined to explain that the cherub, though accessible to the public, is not a public work because of the intentions of the artist. The artist who sculpted the cherub did not intend for it to be a work of public art, but a work that would stand in the private collection of a rich patron. If the work was not intended as public art by the artist, it would be wrong to interpret it as a work of public art.

But this would be an error. The artist’s intentions aren’t perceptible directly. Appreciators may be able to *infer* the intentions of the artist (“This isn’t Italy. Who would put a lovely marble cherub out on the street corner? It must be an installation,”) but the intentions of the artist, like the history of the work, are not perceptible unless they manifest in some way in the artwork. And if the intentions manifest in some feature in the artwork, then it is that feature, and not the intentions of the artist, to which audiences attend. So while the artist’s intentions may jointly determine which works wind up in the street, the intentions themselves cannot be standard features of the category of *public art*.

A similar argument would hold, *mutatis mutandis*, for the case that the decisions of public curators constitute a standard feature of the category of public art. With the exception of street art and other illicit artistic contributions to the public sphere, most public art is placed only after consultation with many

¹¹ McMurray, *Praying Hands*.

stakeholders: artists, citizens, city councils, program directors, and so forth. Often, a small group of people decides what art is placed in the public square. Their decision provides a reason that the artwork is in the public sphere, but their decision cannot constitute a standard feature of the category. Here's why. The statue *Charging Bull*, a giant bronze bull pawing the ground mid-charge, stands in Bowling Green park in the financial district in New York.¹² It is a major tourist attraction, drawing millions each year, most of whom have forgotten, if they ever knew, that the bull was a work of guerilla art, placed stealthily at night by artist DiModica. It is not obvious from anything about the artwork that it was originally illicit, or that it has had an unofficial expired permit for nearly thirty years. As a result, none of those facts about *Charging Bull* can be standard features. Contrast this with another work of public art, *Fearless Girl*, a statue of a small girl, arms akimbo, positioned so she appears to be defiantly facing down the bull.¹³ At her feet rests a small placard which reads, "Know the power of women in leadership. SHE makes a difference." It may take some unusual knowledge, or at least a quick Google, to realize that "SHE" is not capitalized for emphasis, but because it is the stock ticker symbol of the investment firm that sponsored the artwork. Yet the name is visible in the artwork, and so is eligible influence the evaluation of *Fearless Girl* as a work of public art. If the placard did not exist, however, even if the circumstances of the work were otherwise identical, the origin of the work would not be perceptible. Thus, in general, we can say that the imperceptible intentions of the artists and the curators are not standard features of the category of public art.

While whether the artwork was meant to be public is imperceptible, the artwork's integration with the space around it is not. Kapoor's *Cloud Gate*, nicknamed "The Bean" for its legume-like shape, reflects the Chicago streets and passersby. The surface is so perfectly polished that the skyscrapers reflected in it appear to form a dome over and around the city, giving an almost vertigo-like effect as the reflections bend around its surface. It is an artwork and a destination, for it has become a popular place for photographs. Now imagine an intrinsic duplicate of *Cloud Gate* surrounded not by tall buildings, but by endless fields of wheat and an open sky. It would no doubt still be a striking sculpture, but it would likely not induce the same sense of awe tinged with vertigo. The artwork makes use of the cityscape. Absent Chicago, it would lose much of its aesthetic power.

Now consider another duplicate of *Cloud Gate* with a dark matte finish - *Stormy Gate*, if you will. *Stormy Gate*'s surface does not reflect the city. It is hard to imagine that it would be as effective as *Cloud Gate*. Its matte bulk would make it seem like an invader of the city, physically taking up space yet giving nothing back. *Stormy Gate* in a cornfield would be nearly the same, for it would reflect nothing whether it was seated in Chicago or a cornfield.

Cloud Gate is aesthetically *site-specific*: it matters to the aesthetic experience of the work that it was placed in a particular location. As a standard feature, we may say that a work is site-specific if it has perceptible non-aesthetic features that are dependent on its location. The reflectivity and proportion of *Cloud Gate* are perceptible non-aesthetic features that give rise to the sense of awe one experiences when visiting the site.

Site-specificity comes in degrees, so a work of public art may be more or less site-specific than another work of public art. A work that lacks site-specificity entirely, like the misplaced cherub fallen from its crate, will tend not to be included in the category of public art. *Stormy Gate* is less site-specific than *Cloud Gate* because its matte surface means that the immediate surroundings of the artwork matter less to its aesthetic appreciation.

We have identified two standard features of the category of public art. It is standard in the category of public art that artworks are accessible to the general public and site-specific. Being inaccessible, as in work that is in a museum, or non-site-specific, will tend to disqualify works from membership in the category. These two standards are doubtless not the only standard features of public art, but identifying them will suffice to help explain why so much public art is bad.

What's distinctive about the category of public art is that many of the features of the artwork *qua* artwork are *variable*. Think of the category of public art as intersecting other categories of art. The category

¹² Di Modica, *Charging Bull*.

¹³ Visbal, *Fearless Girl*.

of sculpture picks out three-dimensional forms, especially made by those made by carving or casting; the category of public sculpture adds as standard features accessibility and site-specificity. When we appreciate a sculpture *qua* sculpture, we'll attend to its shape and form. When we appreciate a sculpture as a work of public art, we are invited to attend not only to its shape and form, but attend to whether it is accessible to the public, and how it interacts with the site.

We can already see why it might be more difficult to make good public art. A work might be aesthetically pleasing in a museum but placed in such a way that as a work of public art, it is annoying, disrupting the view or blocking the flow of traffic. So the answer to the question why is public art so often bad is that as public art, a work must be appreciable not just in one category but in two. More is required for success.

But I think there's something deeper. There is often a tension between accessibility and site-specificity that makes it exceedingly difficult to develop successful works of public art. The standard features of public art pull against each other so that success is not merely a matter of trying to incorporate the standard features into the work, but also wrangling two features that often pull in opposite directions. To understand why, we need to delve more deeply into the concept of 'accessibility.'

3 Accessibility versus site-specificity

In 2007, the virtuoso violinist Joshua Bell conducted an experiment, a stunt sponsored by the *Washington Post*. Bell is well known for a classical musician. He is good-looking, and a natural showman who has appeared in film, on late-night TV, and on *Sesame Street*. For this stunt, he took his precious Stradivari violin, donned a baseball cap, and set up in an arcade by the doors of the DC Metro L'Enfant subway station. Disguised as a busker, he began to play "Chaconne" from J.S. Bach's Partita No. 2 in D Minor, an astonishingly difficult and beautiful piece.¹⁴

According to Weingarten, whose account of the stunt won the Pulitzer Prize for Feature Writing, the acoustics were surprisingly good, as the hard surfaces of the subway station provided a lively venue for the sounds of the violin. Bell played, and secret cameras recorded the reactions of commuters. Yet nearly every passerby walked by, seemingly oblivious to the fact that a world-class performance was occurring right in the middle of their morning commute. Those who stopped to listen reported in interviews that they had experience with the violin, and knew from the quality of his playing that they were not in the presence of an ordinary subway artist. But the vast majority barely acknowledged Bell. His hour as a busker netted him \$32.17.

The stunt was conceived as an 'assessment of public taste', and as Weingarten concedes, most experts agree that it fails as a measure of public taste. Most people hurrying to work are caught up in their own thoughts and concerns, or constrained by the requirement to be on time for work. They'd likely fail to notice an escaped lion unless it blocked the doors, so we should not conclude from Bell's experiment that the average person has poor musical taste. But I do think the examples show something about the multivocal nature of *accessibility*.

Thus far, I've treated accessibility as a matter of physical access, but another way in which we commonly use the word 'accessible' ties it to the ease of aesthetic appreciation. Accessibility is a property of artworks, and it is relativized both to the relevant audience and the relevant context. Think of the analog of physical access. A high shelf that is accessible to an adult might not be accessible to a small child. The high shelf might be accessible with a step stool, but absent the step-stool its contents remain frustratingly out of reach.

Similarly, a work of classical music that is accessible to well-trained fans of classical music might be inaccessible to those who are unfamiliar with classical music. The untrained fans won't know to which features of the work they should attend, and while they might be able to appreciate some of the work, some of the nuances of the performance will be lost on them. And lest one think that inaccessibility is nothing more than a shorthand for 'catering to the tastes of the wealthy', we can reasonably argue that the virtues of Scandinavian black metal are probably lost on the novice listener, or the multilayered references of both

¹⁴ Weingarten, "Pearls Before Breakfast."

the poetry, sampling and rhythm of rap are lost to someone who isn't deeply familiar with the genre. To put this in Waltonian terms, a work is accessible to the extent that its standard, contrastandard, and variable features are known to the relevant audience. In the case of public art, there's an additional complication. Accessibility is a standard feature of the category. So while it is not a mark against Bach's *Chaconne* that fully appreciating it requires significant familiarity with Bach's music, its inaccessibility would be a mark against a performance of the work aimed at the general public.

I suggest that we construe accessibility as a standard feature both in the physical sense and in the epistemic sense, in part because of the case of Bell's performance in the subway. Bell played masterfully and filled the entryway with sound. Any person capable of hearing could hear his playing. It was accessible physically to most passersby. But other aspects of his performance cut against the accessibility of the performance. It occurred in a crowded Metro station at rush hour, in a place where a lagging misstep is likely to get one bowled over by other commuters. As Mark Leithauser, a senior curator at the National Gallery noted when interviewed by Weingarten, the performance was not framed as the work of a master violinist, and the framing matters. We expect classical music in concert halls, accessible by only those with deep pockets. We do not expect masterworks in the subway station, and so it's likely that the aesthetic experience of the passersby was colored by the fact that no one would ordinarily think that a busker would be a world-famous musician. Perhaps some had the knowledge to realize that they were hearing very good classical music, performed at a high level, but absent any contextual clues they could not hear that it was being performed at the highest level.

Moreover, Bell noted that his performance, while technically perfect, suffered from a lack of audience. A live performance incorporates a give-and-take from the audience. Here, the audience could not access Bell's performance, but he could not perform the piece in the same way that he would in a concert hall, either. The few passersby who did note that they were in the presence of a remarkable violinist did not really experience the piece as it would have been performed in the Symphony Hall. Bell has commented that "the magic of Bach" couldn't happen. The public site of the performance made public engagement nearly impossible.

In contrast, in 2014, Bell set up another performance at DC's Union Station. This time, he played for thirty minutes, and nine accomplished student musicians accompanied him. The venue was very similar to his earlier experiment, but this time, the event announced in advance in the *Washington Post*. Bell performed in a black shirt but did not obscure his face. And he hoped that with an audience, he would be able to produce a performance, that if not as memorable and viral as his first performance, would satisfy both him and passersby.¹⁵

What's the difference between the two cases? In the first performance, the site of the performance worked against the accessibility of the performance. A busy subway station is no place to have an impromptu violin concert. In the second performance, the performance successfully incorporated the constraints of the site to produce a work that was epistemically accessible to the public. The accessibility of the music *qua* music didn't change, as the second set, like the first, featured difficult works by Bach and Mendelssohn. Yet by framing the work, both through the article preceding the performance in the *Washington Post* and with student accompaniment, the performance became accessible, and the site, rather than an impediment to the performance, facilitated it. One might also suggest that the goal of the performance changed. Instead of providing a test to see whether commuters can identify the most excellent performances of classical music, the goal of the performance was simply to perform excellent classical music for the public.

In the story of Bell's performances, we can see that the two standard features of the category of public art often work against each other. The performance's use of the subway station made it less likely that the performance would be accessible by the public. Another example of this kind of tension can be seen in the famous case of the reception of *Tilted Arc*. The controversial work was a solid, unfinished, slightly tilted plate of steel that bisected Federal Plaza in New York. *Tilted Arc* is maximally site-specific because its artistic and aesthetic aims could not be achieved without its precise location and material construction, because the work was meant to disrupt traffic in the plaza, forcing commuters to interact with it, and forcing them

15 Contrera, "Joshua Bell is playing in the Metro again. This time, maybe you won't pass it up."

to think about how they traversed the plaza. It succeeded in disrupting traffic, but the work visually was an ugly rusty metal wall, and the work was not epistemically accessible. Pedestrians did not experience the high concept of the work at all. They did not contemplate their formerly mindless paths. They just thought it was in their way, and ugly to boot.

A work that was prettier or smaller would not have accomplished what Serra set out to do. A prettier work would be more accessible, but then the public would appreciate the work as a public sculpture, instead of an embodied meditation of the use of public space. A smaller work might have been more accessible, but would not have disrupted the use of the plaza. To make *Tilted Arc* more accessible would require undermining what Serra took to be the virtues of its site-specificity.

Often, when faced with a choice between accessibility and site-specificity, accessibility easily wins, and some of the most pernicious examples of public art are those which ignore site-specificity in favor of a facilely accessible production. Accessible works need not cater to the lowest common denominator, but they often do. It seems to be a common malady among statues. *Forever Marilyn*, a 26-foot-tall sculpture of the iconic image of Marilyn Monroe taming her cheekily billowing dress in *The Seven Year Itch*, has been displayed in locations across the U.S. and Australia. The work is accessible to the general public, who can be assumed to be familiar with the famous image of Monroe even if they haven't seen the film.¹⁶ Yet it has nothing to do with the sites at which it is displayed. It's just a giant woman, posing in arbitrary locales, its location noteworthy only when in one installation, the statue appeared to be mooning a church in Stamford, Connecticut.¹⁷

Of course, the category of public art is not unique in having features that can be opposed. An optimal performance of the third movement of Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* will include passages that must be played both at incredible speeds and very softly. Given the mechanism of piano keys, that is very hard to do, because accelerating the key downward tends to produce a louder sound. Nothing necessitates that works that are accessible to the public fail as site-specific works, nor that works that are maximally site specific are inaccessible. Nevertheless, the difficulty that lies in achieving both accessibility and site-specificity simultaneously suggests that one way that bad public art is characteristically bad lies in the excessive pursuit of one quality coming at the expense of the other.

When a public artwork like *Monument Against Fascism* successfully balances accessibility and site-specificity, the result can be transcendent. The seven-ton, twelve-meter high column stood in the busy public square of Hamburg-Harburg. As a participatory work, the public was invited to mark their names into the soft leaden sides of the column. The invitation itself was displayed in seven languages at the site. The work slowly sank into the earth, and one might not have noticed immediately that the markings began at the base of the statue. As it receded, new clean space would become accessible, signifying that the work of standing up to injustice is ongoing. After the last inches of the monument sank into the earth, all that remains visible is its top and the accompanying text.¹⁸

Monument Against Fascism managed both the accessibility standard and the site-specific standard, and it did so brilliantly by subverting the traditional idea of a monument. A monument memorializes things past; a traditional monument against fascism might enjoin the remembrance of those who fought against injustice. *Monument Against Fascism*, in inviting participation, insists that to be against fascism historically necessitates that one must act now. Imagine going unawares to the site as it now stands, a black square amidst cobblestones, and the realization: *I am the monument. Those who went before me are in the ground.*

4 Conclusion

I have argued here that two standard features of the category of public art are accessibility to the public, construed broadly to include physical and epistemic access, and site-specificity. Much more remains to be

¹⁶ Johnson, *Forever Marilyn*.

¹⁷ Kuruvilla, "Church Is Taking Appearance Of Gigantic Marilyn Monroe Statue In Stride."

¹⁸ Shalev-Gerz, Esther. "Monument Against Fascism."

said about the category of public art. Public art, as we see in controversies over Confederate memorials in the southern U.S., contests the use of public space, and arguably some of the putative badness of public art arises from this conflict. It's also plausible that the category of public art should include works of digital art, and so much more work remains to elucidate the concept of the public as it applies to communities in cyberspace. None of what I've argued here addresses these important topics.

Yet as standard features of public art, accessibility and site-specificity explain one way that public art is characteristically bad. Accessibility and site-specificity are easily opposed, such that works that maximize accessibility run the risk of a deficit in site-specificity, and vice versa. While bad paintings might be hidden in closets and bad piano performances tucked away in practice rooms, bad public art must play out in the public sphere.

No wonder we can't escape it.¹⁹

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