

The Dual Turn of Contemporary Public Art: From Being Collected to Becoming "Public"

Yanjie Sun

*Camberwell College of Arts, University of the Arts London, London, United Kingdom
y.sun0220223@arts.ac.uk*

Abstract. In response to the background of the rise of privatization, the remodeling of curatorial mode and the strengthening of the role that market plays in culture policies, this research takes public art itself as the subject, studies the changes in the definition of "public" in contemporary public art, including this research as well. Once public artworks defined by their physicality in civic spaces and accessibility to many audiences, many public artworks today experience changes in space, legality and symbolism. Some are removed from the public domain and incorporated into personal collections, while others are reintroduced into public domain through foundations, corporate display, philanthropy, etc. These developments cause a boundary between the public and private goods to be hard to see. And cause questions on how visible, participatory, and cultural ownership is. Through a study of the cases of Banksy, Richard Serra, and Augusta Savage, this paper looks at how alterations in ownership and institutional oversight are remaking access to art, as well as the public's perception and resonance with it. By referring to Tony Bennet's idea of an "Exhibitionary Complex" and Pierre Bourdieu's idea of "cultural capital", the essay states that the importance of public art does not rest on its being placed or put up in some sort of regulation but in it being able to trigger remembrance, and to be a location for talk and to be open to everyone. Ultimately it needs a combination of private/public actors to keep the cultural/civic function of public art during a time of system transformation.

Keywords: Art, Privatization, Cultural Capital, Exhibitionary Complex, Re-publicization

1. Introduction

Public art has been a part of cultural practices in the creation of Urban spaces, its as much a decoration as it is a means for Democratic Expression, Group memories and Social involvement. From Monuments to Street Murals, Public Art is valuable for its accessibility - it is seen, used, and shared with a public that is many. But in the last several decades as the art market has grown and as private capital has become more powerful, public art has undergone a structural shift we can call a double turn, artworks that are originally out in the open, accessible to anyone in the public has now been put in private collections or institutional collections, thus undoing its public; while private collections is being brought back into the public domain via curated exhibitions, branded cultural space, and philanthropic effort, a strategic re-publicization.

The change of "publicness" definition in the current public art with the analysis of private ownership and institutional control, and the way art is seen, touched and appreciated. Noting down both Tony Bennett's notion of "Exhibitionary Complex" [1] and also about this idea of 'Apprenticeship' because we take in this text Bourdieu's theory on the concept of 'cultural capital' as well as showing this as power withing space and visibility over artworks. This article makes a series of cases through, such as works of Banksy, Richard Serra, Augusta Savage, the real meaning of public art is not to see who can own them, but to see if they can be still seen by the public. In the end, the paper concludes it is being seen, being remembered, and being experienced collectively that sustains the social and cultural power of public art in a time of more privatization.

2. The privatization of public art and the transformation of publicness

In recent decades, the boundaries between public and private ownership of art have become increasingly vague. Public artworks, when commissioned for communal Spaces and Design to be viewed by the general public, more and more face the dilemma of being removed, resold, or recontextualized in private or institutional environments. This change means more than just a change of place, it's the public art has changed in the way of it was supposed to mean and be accessible. When they are taken off the street, Parks, Plazas and put in private homes, Corporate Lobby, Auctions, their public view and socio-political contexts are gone or completely erased. Such changes in the transition ask us to question who has the right to access, save, or earn from art that was originally made to engage with the public.

One of the most emblematic cases of the trend described in the previous paragraph is Banksy's mural *Slave Labour*, which was painted on a wall in North London. Work also became a local culture landmark by using the flag that mocked the globalization of children's work - Boy sewing union flag. But it was in 2013 that the mural seemed to have just as mysteriously been taken down from the wall and wound up at a private auction in Miami. Even though the sale in the end was called off because of public outcry, the fact of the matter is that the right to property is more important than community sentiment. The symbolic force of the work was intrinsically linked with the site-specificity of the work and if removed from that context it loses the political critique as well as its accessibility.

Antony Gormley's *Another Place* (1997) is a series of 100 life-size cast-iron figures installed along Crosby Beach near Liverpool, also shares a similar route of development. Originally conceived as an exhibition in its own right, the public and institutional responses contributed to it being acquired permanently by Sefton Council and regularly managed. Though it remains on site, it has become an element of a more formal tourism and marketing strategy. Gormley's solo figures, meditations on space and body, are now part of a managed institutional story. It goes from being a spontaneous public experience to something that is regulated and turned into a cultural commodity.

More systemic example of privatization could be found in the appraisal and selling off of British municipal art collections. In 2023, Sotheby's offered to help cash-strapped local councils in the UK with valuations and potential auctions of items from their public art inventories [4]. Though offering temporary relief to the finances, this is actually tremendous privatization of the public culture. Artworks that were once seen as civic treasures are being evaluated according to the market, and thus their role is changing from that of public edification to one of private investment. And when the art be like a liquid kinda capital, it erases the shared culturally stories with others which unite different groups of peeps in collective mem'ry & idents'.

We can use Tony Bennett's idea of the exhibitionary complex [1] to understand these cases, it states how museums and public displays have created civic subjects by means of visual education

historically. In this framework, public art moving to private will diminish its teaching and civic aspects. No longer in the public civilizing program of the social, privatized artworks no longer serve as a medium for the public to remember and comment upon. Instead, they become objects that are at the mercy of market demand and the whims of the elites.

In addition, legal and cultural criticisms of this process also uncover other contradictions. As per the argument of Gilden, property law usually puts priority on private ownership instead of the moral and cultural claims that the public has on the artworks which results in a legal dispute that makes the bigger ethical issues unclear [5]. Likewise, Tushnet notes how visual art in public and private space is managed under an uneven regulatory scheme where protections for cultural access are meager or nonexistent [6]. Morrill also indicate some problems caused by public art marketization; it abandon the democratic feature of public art, public art turn into something lucky instead of shared aesthetics [7].

Thus, in summary, the privatization of public art does not pertain to moving or having, but on meaning, to use for, and value. Once these items have been installed in public spaces and in the minds of people, there is now a risk that they will become devalued, recontextualized or lost in time. As the ownership of public art shifts from cities to collectors, and from communities to capital, public art is in danger of becoming a symbol of exclusion rather than inclusion, a commodity rather than a communal asset, as Rosenbush points out, even the relocation of public art from the street to the home is an extension of the privatization of artworks, which changes the very conditions of visibility [8].

3. From private collections to public re-publicization

In the development of modern art, private art collections are becoming more and more important for the public to experience culture. No longer limited to the private interior spaces of the elite or private viewing rooms, many of the private collections of artworks are now available to the public in various accessible spaces, from shopping malls, foundation to airports, urban parks, etc. This is a move toward the counter force of the public art being privatized talked about in the last chapter. It shows that collectors and institutions alike want to contribute to people's lives with culture, and it also shows that the public has an increasing demand for a wide range of culture that is immersive and visually pleasing. In this light, private re-publicization provides an alternative model of curatorship, which is more adaptable and geared toward the public's interests and more immediate than cultural planning conducted under the auspices of the state.

One of the most typical cases of this trend is K11 Art Foundation, set up by Adrian Cheng in Hong Kong. The ground joins commerce and culture together, stuffing exhibitions of present art into shop commercial area. K11 malls exhibit works of new and old artists in rotation, and often use digital media, participatory installations, and regional themes. Although these projects have a commercial end, they have redefined how people have access to art, allowing people, tourists, and locals to interact with modern art in their daily lives. This is part of a broader pattern, as noted by Brandellero and Janssen, that private collectors are more frequently able to argue that their lending and display activities are contributions to public cultural life [9].

Rockefeller Foundation has long been associated with public art for much the same reason. Foundations and partnerships with museums, Universities getting privately owned art into the public sphere. They often use their collaboration to deal with some social problems such as climate change, racial equity and so on, and look at these problems through the means of art. As a result is a kind of curated citizenship, in which the public consumes visual culture and participates in larger stories about society.

But such a private-public partnership will look much better next to a government failure. A counter-example to this is the work *Tilted Arc* (1981) by Richard Serra, which was a large scale, curved steel sculpture commissioned by the US General Services Administration and placed in the Federal Plaza, Manhattan. Serra's work cut through the site, bisecting the open plaza and reconfiguring the movement. While the artist intended the work to inspire thought about Space and Power, many office workers and users of the city saw the work as in the way and even controlling. After years of discussion and public hearing, the federal government decided to take and remove the work in 1989, which received great opposition from art circles [3].

And it has great discrepancy that government has the power and then the people's expectation is like this. The taking down of *Tilted Arc* was not a matter of logistics but was the indication that public art is weak when the public do not give it sustained interest and transparency. The work was never placed elsewhere and Serra himself insisted that it could not exist in any other circumstances. However, if a private institution or cultural foundation had gotten involved, and they offered to show the work in some way that was more controlled, more audience-sensitive, then the work might still exist and it might still have that dialogue with space.

In this context, the idea of re-publicizing through private custodianship becomes a feasible approach. Privately run cultural spaces can be rather physical nimble and public reaching as compared to governmental systems. While it is certain that there are commercial interests, most of these institutions would, at a minimum, participate in a type of model that seeks to lessen the separation between the curator's vision and the public. Using such methods like active Branding, community program and collaborative partnerships, they have possibilities of presenting cultural tale which will be able to speak to the contemporary public more.

Theoretical bits from Pierre Bourdieu's theory on cultural capital helps with context. According to Bourdieu, institutions and individuals gain symbolic power by associating themselves with culturally legitimate practices and artifacts. By restating art in convenient, interactive forms, the prestige of private collectors and foundations is no longer limited to itself but also influences cultural taste, thus creating the status of value present in the public's eye. This negotiation of being seen, access and identity makes up re-publicization as a curatorial model [2].

Tilted Arc's case also proves that such a republishing is able to get away from those risks that the government cultural planning is faced with; it is usually affected by bureaucratic limitations or uneducated populism. Private platforms, although not beyond criticism, generally conduct more refined audience research, storytelling strategies and contextual framing. With those tools they can bring about cultural experiences that are more inclusive and resilient.

In conclusion, although private curatorship brings the risk of market-driven aesthetics, it also fills a blank left by the state's disengagement or curator's mistaken judgment. Making private collections publicly exhibited is for space and also viewing curation on what parts can public art flourish. Johnson also notes that taking art "public" often means negotiating between the desire for access and control from institutions, and that re-publicization is not free from ideology [10]. So re-publicization by private parties should be seen not as a problem but as a supplementary pathway for reconciliation between the artist's own interests and those of a public audience and institutional sustainability.

4. The secondary market and functional transformation of public art

With public artworks entering the secondary art market, the role of these artworks in the city changes. These things that were once made to be shared cultural experiences, after being made into commodities, lose their original historical and social contexts. Outside their designated settings, these works may lose touch with the public they originally reached. Although the movement of

change may be said to be a loss of culture, in such a case, it also suggests a new path, that is, rethinking privatized public art with the idea of institution. In some cases, transferring ownership to private or semi-private entities enables the works to be safeguarded, restored and especially re-publicised under controlled and sustainable circumstances. So then the secondary market becomes both a danger to public memory as well as a possible means of its preservation if governed well by the right kind of curatorial policy and by institutions.

One example of such a change would be the selling and being moved away from decommissioned monuments as well as Olympic statues. Public artworks that are displaced because of changes in the city, financial difficulties, or political reconsideration are sold to private people. Although some are subsequently shown in private museums or sculpture parks, their symbolic public role is inevitably changed. A national monument, once part of the collective identity or memory, loses its significance after being removed and placed in the collection of elites that reshapes it by context.

More poignant case is Augusta Savage's *The Harp* [11], which was created for the New York World's Fair. The sculpture, inspired by the poem *Lift Every Voice and Sing* by James Weldon Johnson, known as the Black national anthem, was 16 feet tall and the choir of the Black figures formed the string of the harp, it was supported by a protective arm and a hand. It was all lots and lots of racial pride and cultural togetherness and social forward movement. However, owing to lack of finances and materials, *The Harp* is made from painted plaster and not bronze; like so many of the temporary installations of the Fair, it was demolished afterwards. Only miniature souvenir replicas exist today [11].

The loss of *The Harp* is the destruction of a major contribution to the public space by the constraints of institution and funds. If a private foundation had collected and preserved the work and made it available to the public, it would have continued to be relevant and visible in the historical account of African American art. In this sense *The Harp* is as much a case of what is lost when public art is not saved as it is of what might happen through coordinated privatization with a public agenda.

Like Luukkanen-Hirvikoski [12], and the Nonprofit Quarterly [13], who have warned of how secondary markets have deconstructed the collective identity functions of public art. At the same time these very same scholars also identify new forms of institutional arrangements in which private collections and corporate sponsors are keeping works accessible to the public. This means that privatization is likely to serve as a form of "curated re-publicization" when privatization is coupled with some kind of regulatory framework, cultural commitment (such as exhibitions, education, urban visibility requirements, etc.).

This chapter does not see privatization and public interest as diametrically opposed. Strategic curation, if done by private foundations, museums, or collectors – if it is incentivized or directed by policy – will still keep the cultural significance of public art if ownership changes. The coordination of public visibility with private stewardship might thus provide a pragmatic and resilient model for the civic role of art in the age of financial and spatial constraint.

Even if the entrance of public artworks into the second market brings the danger of commodification and cultural loss, structured forms of re-publicization could still be a good alternative. If private collectors or institutions were to assume the responsibility of keeping a work accessible to the public and relevant to the culture, then this too could prove an important hedge against the failure of public planning or funding. He argues that the expanding power of the private on public culture's good is also its future which is complicated; he also notes that the going on art of history is balanced against market logics and civic responsibly [14]. *The harp* serves as a tragedy

that is instructive: public art must not disappear due to market forces or the disregard of materials. And its persistence – whether publicly or privately owned – must continue to be a shared goal if art is to be kept as a record of the collective and a symbol of the self.

5. Conclusion

This paper thus makes a case for an equilibrium approach of future public art policies that has private and public interests, market logic and institutional frameworks working together. Ensure that public artworks are not obstructed, easily accessible and carry cultural traits. Ultimately, the publicness of art is not a fixed state but a process—perpetuated through continuous dialogue, open-ended curation and shared accountability. Public art has cultural and social meaning only if it continues to be seen, engaged with and interpreted by many different publics. Refer to ateliers guide to public art, where the effective long terms methods are evident; it must be recognized as a cultural investment and public resource.

In reality there are no always guaranteed ways to connect art to the public whether state managed or fully privatized. Instead, there could be a dynamic between privatization and re-publicization that would be a viable way to maintain some level of publicness. Private collections can provide more flexible and rich curatorial methods to solve some problems in the government lead the way, such as the rigidity of bureaucracy and the failure to meet the public's expectations. On the other hand, good public policy and laws are necessary to stop privatization from detaching art from the masses culturally.

Thus, this paper suggests in the future public art policies that the private and public interest, market logic and institutional framework all need to work together. In other words, keep public artworks within sight, touch and imbued with culture. In the end, the publicness of art is not a stable state but a process - it persists through continuous dialogue, open display and joint accountability. Public art keeps its culture and society meanings if it is kept being watched, interacted with, and understood by different publics.

References

- [1] Bennett, T. (1995) *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*. London: Routledge. Available at: <https://www.routledge.com/The-Birth-of-the-Museum/Bennett/p/book/9780415116908> (Accessed: 20 June 2025).
- [2] Bourdieu, P. (1984) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Translated by R. Nice. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- [3] Senie, H.F. (2007) 'The Controversy That Wouldn't Die: Tilted Arc and the Triumph of Spectacle', *Sculpture*, 26(7), pp. 10–11. Available at: <https://research-ebsco-com.arts.idm.oclc.org/linkprocessor/plink?id=2d3c9996-a648-3a69-8f79-9f11ddf825d7> (Accessed: 28 June 2025).
- [4] Financial Times (2023) 'Sotheby's offers to value cash-strapped councils' art collections', *Financial Times*, 27 November. Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/05532d24-a928-46cd-8eff-89a60189f5ff> (Accessed: 18 June 2025).
- [5] Gilden, A. (2023) 'Property Law's Case against Private Hoarding of "Public" Art', *UConn Law Review*, 55(3), pp. 901–935. Available at: https://digitalcommons.lib.uconn.edu/law_review/1379 (Accessed: 22 June 2025).
- [6] Tushnet, R. (2022) *Worth a Thousand Words: The Law of Visual Art in Public and Private Spaces*. Georgetown Law Faculty Publications, Paper 3157. Available at: <https://scholarship.law.georgetown.edu/facpub/3157> (Accessed: 22 June 2025).
- [7] Morrill, A. (2024) 'Public Art and Private Wealth', *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 30(2), pp. 145–162. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09647775.2024.2312576> (Accessed: 15 June 2025).
- [8] Rosenbush, S. (2015) 'Off the Street, Into the Home', *Wall Street Journal*, 9 June. Available at: <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1713902339> (Accessed: 30 June 2025).

- [9] Brandellero, A. and Janssen, S. (2024) 'Private art collectors on motivations to donate, deposit, or lend out artworks', *Cultural Trends*, 33(1), pp. 48–65. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09548963.2024.2400100>(Accessed: 16 June 2025).
- [10] Johnson, J.D. (2013) 'Taking It Public', *Maclean's*, 11 November. Available at: <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=da0b6d1f-2fbc-3da4-98a3-4154ba678d65> (Accessed: 1 July 2025).
- [11] Gaither, E.B. (1990) 'Augusta Savage: Lift Every Voice and Sing', *Art Education*, 43, pp. 25–26. Available at: <https://research-ebsco-com.arts.idm.oclc.org/linkprocessor/plink?id=6c0e12db-3858-33b5-9747-1632782e9578>(Accessed: 28 June 2025).
- [12] Luukkanen-Hirvikoski, T. (2021) 'Between Private and Public: Corporate Art Collecting and Collaboration with Art Museums in Finland', in Robbins, N. et al. (eds.) *Museum Studies: Bridging Theory and Practice*. Paris: ICOFOM, pp. 271–292. Available at: <https://jyx.jyu.fi/bitstream/handle/123456789/77680/bridgingtheoryandpracticeluukkanenhirvikoski.pdf> (Accessed: 24 June 2025).
- [13] Nonprofit Quarterly (2022) 'Public Art's Secondary Market', *Nonprofit Quarterly*, 13 January. Available at: <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/public-arts-secondary-market/> (Accessed: 26 June 2025).
- [14] Adler, R. (2023) 'Private Influence, Public Goods, and the Future of Art History', *Journal for Art Market Studies*, 7(1). Available at: <https://fokum-jams.org/index.php/jams/article/view/86> (Accessed: 3 July 2025).