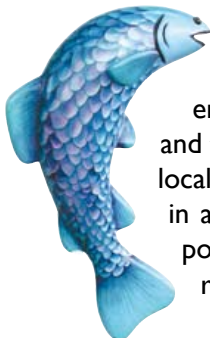


Introduction

A diverse array of provocative and innovative art experiences have made the new millennium an exciting time for those of us who believe in the importance of the arts to a vibrant society. As documented in this book, public art has assumed a leading role in this movement by taking to the streets like never before in the form of popular exhibitions themed on animal and cultural icons. “It’s a zoo out there,” reported one national newspaper as it reviewed the menagerie of fiberglass animal sculptures stampeding and swimming across America’s urban landscapes.



The formula behind the phenomenon is simple: Select a recognizable and charismatic animal or figure that represents your community. Cultivate corporate and business sponsors to underwrite the costs of the exhibition. Invite local artists to put their creative signatures on a fiberglass form. Place the artworks strategically around the community to attract locals and visitors. Issue maps that encourage everyone to go on a sculptural treasure hunt. And then, at the end of the exhibition, auction off the festive artworks, with proceeds going to local charities and non-profit organizations.



The results have been nothing less than sensational. Disparate community elements - governments, businesses, artists, and not-for-profit organizations - have partnered on entrepreneurial joint ventures from which everyone prospers. The projects have given cities and towns a promotable identity, while increasing tourism and injecting millions of dollars into local economies. Businesses have formed creative alliances with not-for-profit organizations in a visionary paradigm for fund-raising. Taking playful delight in illustrating the unexpected possibilities of painting an unconventional canvas, artists have received career-boosting recognition.

In many ways these projects could be thought of as modern-day, artistic versions of another popular phenomenon that dates back to the latter part of the nineteenth century, when traveling circuses or parades would roll through cities and towns across America. Pulled by teams of stallions in gay plumage, sparkling floats and elaborate vehicles carrying clowns, musicians, lady performers and animal cages would parade down Main Street, set up camp for a brief stay, and, after lending color and interest and captivating the local audience, roll out of town.

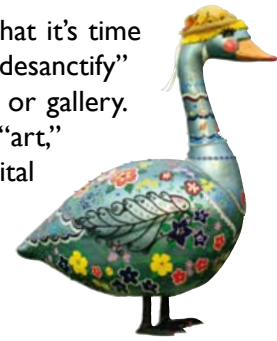
To view a cow playing frisbee, a pig dancing in a sequined vest, a horse artistically souped up as a motorcycle, and to stroll among a school of fantastic fish you wouldn’t find listed in any scientific journal, offers contemporary Americans a similarly joyful experience.

Of course, public art wouldn’t be doing its job if it didn’t generate a certain amount of controversy, and these art parades have aroused their share of detractors. Left out of the loop and unused to giving the public a say in what constitutes “art,” many fine arts administrators have ridiculed the artwork because it does not include social or political commentary, but emphasizes public entertainment instead.





Overwhelmingly, however, the projects have had their champions who counter that it's time for a change of vision when it comes to the definition of "public art." It's time to "desanctify" the whole notion of art as something that has to be experienced in a museum or gallery. If handmade, graphically inventive and conceptually imaginative images aren't "art," then what are they? If the final creation doesn't meet the level of art with a capital "A" set by fine arts administrators, that is more than offset by the educational value of allowing the public to witness the artistic process at work as artists go from concept to reality, balancing color and space while completing a design. Furthermore, these projects are a great way of getting people and community groups involved in the arts, and public art in particular.



In most communities, after a run of several months, the "art parades" came to an end, leaving behind wonderful memories and a legacy of benefits. But the American art parade story does not stop there. More than offering Americans an art experience outside a traditional context, these projects introduced something thrilling to the contemporary art scene. The amazing diversity of the creative spirit they expressed, combined with their celebration in fresh aesthetic terms of what was unique about each participating city and town, succeeded in creating a new, national art community. American art parades united Americans in a unique way, and the bonding element was art.

This book captures the magic that has occurred and is still occurring on Main Street, America, while at the same time it introduces this phenomenon as an authentic American art movement. Readers are invited to take an armchair tour of the artland of America via *American ArtParades: When Pigs Flew, Guitars Rocked, and Cows Jumped Over the Moon*, and to even consider visiting these inspiring communities, where many artworks are still on display.

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