

Preface

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It started in Chicago in 1999 with a disarmingly simple premise: fiberglass cows decorated by mostly local artists, each commissioned and sponsored by a different business, displayed on sidewalks and in plazas and ending with a charity auction. No overarching curatorial premise, no grand theoretical construct, just simple art from and for the community at a basic level.



And what a success it was! That summer saw a community-oriented public art project on the streets of Chicago that unexpectedly generated more public interest and support than any previous temporary public art project anywhere.

Nor did it stop there. It expanded to pigs in Cincinnati and Peoria, longhorns in Plano, salmon in Seattle, people in St. Louis and Omaha, horses in Louisville, sunfish in New Orleans, Snoopys in St. Paul, ponies in New Mexico, hearts in San Francisco, labradors in Sun Valley and Racine, cod in Baltimore, bison in Salt Lake City and buffalo in Buffalo, bears, frogs, donkeys, elephants, sunflowers, American Gothic, crawfish, moose, pelicans and an almost endless list of other forms in dozens and dozens of towns and cities across America.

So where did the idea come from and how did the cows arrive in Chicago?

We must go back to the summer of 1998 when a Chicago businessman was on vacation in Zurich, Switzerland. Throughout that city, on its streets and in its public spaces, were scattered over seven hundred odd and delightful looking cows. After Peter Hanig returned home he kept thinking how much he and the other people walking around had enjoyed that unexpected display of art scattered across the urban core of a well-established city. He decided to approach the City of Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs with the idea of holding a similar project in the Windy City.



Why cows in Chicago?

The primary reason is that Zurich had done cows and Chicago was borrowing their idea. More importantly for popular perception, cows and Chicago have a long history. The myth of Mrs. O'Leary's cow and the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 as well as the Stockyards encapsulate both the destruction of the city and its economic renewal.

What happened next?

Consulting with Erna and Beat Seeberger-Quin, the Swiss artists who originated the Zurich project, Chicago decided to do a smaller version of the original project, targeting a goal of one hundred cows in the downtown area. As interest in the project grew, the scale of the project continued to expand until Chicago had more than tripled its original goal, with over three hundred cows on the streets. Sponsorships from local businesses paid the costs of the project, which replaced the more traditional single corporate underwriter model, and kept the event from being "Insert Company Name" presents the Chicago Cows. At the end of the summer about half of the cows were kept by their sponsors while the others were auctioned for charity online by Metromix and live at the Chicago Theater by Sothebys. The auctions raised nearly \$3.5 million, all of which went to charities chosen by the cow's sponsor.





How to explain the success?

Artists, who were encouraged to be innovative and exercise their creativity fully, were interested in participating in a first of its kind large community-oriented public art project that was about showing their work directly to the public, not in a gallery, not in an art fair, just out there on the street. Small business people, who had not previously had the opportunity to sponsor a civic project, welcomed a fresh opportunity to support the community while promoting themselves (and they spent their marketing money on the sponsorships, directing extra hundreds of thousands of dollars directly into the pockets of Chicago's artists which would have otherwise gone into advertising expenses). The general public, visitors and residents alike, enjoyed the project as something which enriched their visit or as a summer hobby, tracking down all of the cows as they came out over the course of June, July and August.



Another fundamental reason for the cow project's success was its inherent democracy. There was no central curatorial control - artists submitted creative designs, sponsors chose the artist they wished to commission and the cow's location, while the viewing public was free to find art on the streets at any time of the day or night.

Furthermore, cows are a fairly universal and comforting animal; their cultural connections circle the world. As a large white fiberglass form they present artists with a challenging object to design and decorate but their inherent familiarity provides viewers easy access into the abstraction of art. The seriality of hundreds of repeated forms with different surface treatments in close geographic proximity creates a theme and variation experience which encourages viewers to have critical conversations and engage in aesthetic analysis of these unnatural bovines, even if that's not what the commuters and shoppers think they are talking about. Many conversations between strangers in Chicago's summer of '99 were about why one cow was better than another, why one set of color combinations was striking while a similar set was dull - that's art talk!



Why, then, did a menagerie of animals proliferate across the country?

To date, the success of the Chicago cow project has inspired close to two hundred similar projects, over eighty-five of which are featured in this book. This prodigious spread of progeny was initially due to the overwhelming popularity of the cows in Chicago. The continuing spread is now due to the proven ability of thematic object-based art projects to be done fairly simply, affordably and, if the icon chosen resonates with the community, to be tremendously popular. If the organizers have prepared well, these are usually fairly safe projects which can serve as a first step in introducing groups and communities that have not previously supported cultural projects to the benefits of supporting the arts. However, the projects are most successful when artistic quality is placed first and trust is placed in the artists to let loose their creativity and explore whatever odd juxtaposition of form and art is being sought.



Ars longa, vita brevis, moove on out.

Nathan Mason
Curator of Special Projects
Public Art Program
Department of Cultural Affairs
City of Chicago