

Natalie Draper

From: Rob Hardy <rbhardy3rd@gmail.com>
Sent: Wednesday, September 15, 2021 12:51 PM
To: Cynthia Gilbertson; Natalie Draper; Kathy Rush; Todd Edwards; Paula Granquist; Karna Hauck; Teresa Jensen; Matthew Klooster; heather@lawrenzjewelry.com; Bob Thacker; jshibata@carleton.edu
Subject: Public Art and the ACC

CAUTION: This email originated from outside of the organization.

Dear Members of the Arts and Culture Commission:

I was unable to attend the ACC meeting on Monday, September 13, but I received reports of the meeting from several sources, all of whom confirmed that the chair of the commission made the following statement: *“we don't want ‘thought-provoking’ art, or art that creates dialogue. Those are not the priorities of the city and we are here to serve the city. We want art that attracts people to Northfield.”*

I strongly object to this statement, and am disappointed that there was evidently no pushback to it from other members of the ACC.

If the chair is correct, art is reduced to boosterism. It becomes branding, not art. It serves the purposes of capitalism, not of democracy. We live in a democracy, and the highest purpose of art in a democracy is not to promote tourism, but to give voice to our diverse stories and find the common thread of humanity that connects them. It is not to create promotional materials for the world as it is, but to imagine—and through our imagining, to create—the world as it could be if we realize our best and highest ideals.

The “Guiding Principles” of the City’s cultural plan begins with this statement: “We, the City of Northfield, value the arts, culture, and creative experiences as ways for us to connect with one another, with ideas, and with ourselves.” While the cultural plan recognizes the economic role of the arts, this role is mentioned only in the sixth of seven bullet points. Art that provides a connection with *ideas*—in other words, “‘thought-provoking’ art, or art that creates dialogue”—is given priority in the City’s own cultural plan.

Public art should exist to resist what author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie calls “the danger of a single story.” The chair’s statement that “we want art that attracts people to Northfield” lays us open to the danger of a single story—a whitewashed, sanitized, tourist brochure version of Northfield that flattens our real experience and mutes the polyphony of our voices. As I have said before, our Land Acknowledgment Statement calls for “acts of honest storytelling” about this place. Such honest storytelling is impossible if “we don’t want ‘thought-provoking’ art, or art that creates dialogue.”

In a democracy, as Fred Evans persuasively argues in his book *Public Art and the Fragility of Democracy*, public art should be “anti-oracular.” It should resist the “single story.” It should resist the restrictive meanings imposed by those in power who insist on speaking for and defining the community. It should resist those who attempt to appropriate the collective “we” to advance the interests of the few. To say that “we don’t want art that creates dialogue” is essentially to say that we don’t want art. We may want advertising. We may want a magic mirror that tells us that we are the fairest. But we don’t want art.

The chair’s remarks, to which the other members evidently acquiesced, seem to me to display a profound misunderstanding of the purpose of public art. Public art is not intended as a means of civic self-promotion, but should in fact promote open and creative dialogue about the issues important to a democracy. Cynthia Nitkin and Fred Kent of the Project for Public Spaces, for example, have written about the importance of public artworks that “stimulat[e] and invit[e] active dialogue rather than just passive observation, thereby fostering social interaction that can even lead to a sense of social cohesion among the viewers themselves.”

For many theorists and practitioners, its thought-provoking nature and the dialogue it creates are the very essence of public art. Social scientist Rhiannon Cobb cites the philosopher Jacques Rancière, for whom “art is disruptive. Done right, [Rancière] says, it can make the spectator rethink their understanding of politics and society by calling to attention previously hidden inequalities. For many, the power of public art rests in its ability to turn artistic practice into a social practice. It challenges the viewer to confront social issues that affect the very place they stand.” This controntation is central to the project of creative placemaking. Cobb concludes: “Listening to artists of diverse backgrounds and elevating communities to participate meaningfully will support important conversations that determine our collective future. And that makes the investment in public art worthwhile for us all.”

Instead of “listening to artists of diverse backgrounds and elevating communities to participate meaningfully” in the creation of public art, the ACC seems to have chosen to become complicit in silencing artists and restricting access to public artmaking. It’s a shame that the Arts and Culture Commission seems to have decided that its mission is branding and boosterism and the promotion of tourism, rather than the actual promotion of arts and culture.

Sincerely,
Rob Hardy

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Rob Hardy
Northfield Poet Laureate
<http://guides.mynpl.org/PoetLaureate>