

Art And Then What?

Evaluating public and participatory art

Key Take-Aways: Americans for the Arts Public Art Marketing & Community Engagement Webinar Series

In Fall 2014, I was invited to lead a webinar for the Americans for the Arts Public Art Network (PAN) [Public Art Marketing & Community Engagement Digital Classroom series](#). Part of PAN's ongoing online leadership development program for public art professionals, this 4-part webinar series focused on how to communicate to different groups of people why we need public art, and how to make public art as visible and impactful as possible—in both physical spaces and online.

The four lectures were organized by sub-topics: “Introduction to Marketing and Community Engagement” (September), “Promoting the value of your public art collection” (October), digital and online strategies (my session, in November), and education (December). See a full summary of all topics and speakers [here](#). Each hour-long slide presentation led by one or more public art experts was coupled with a recap conference call session for participants.

Though each “class” ostensibly addressed a different topic, several key themes ran through all of them, including:

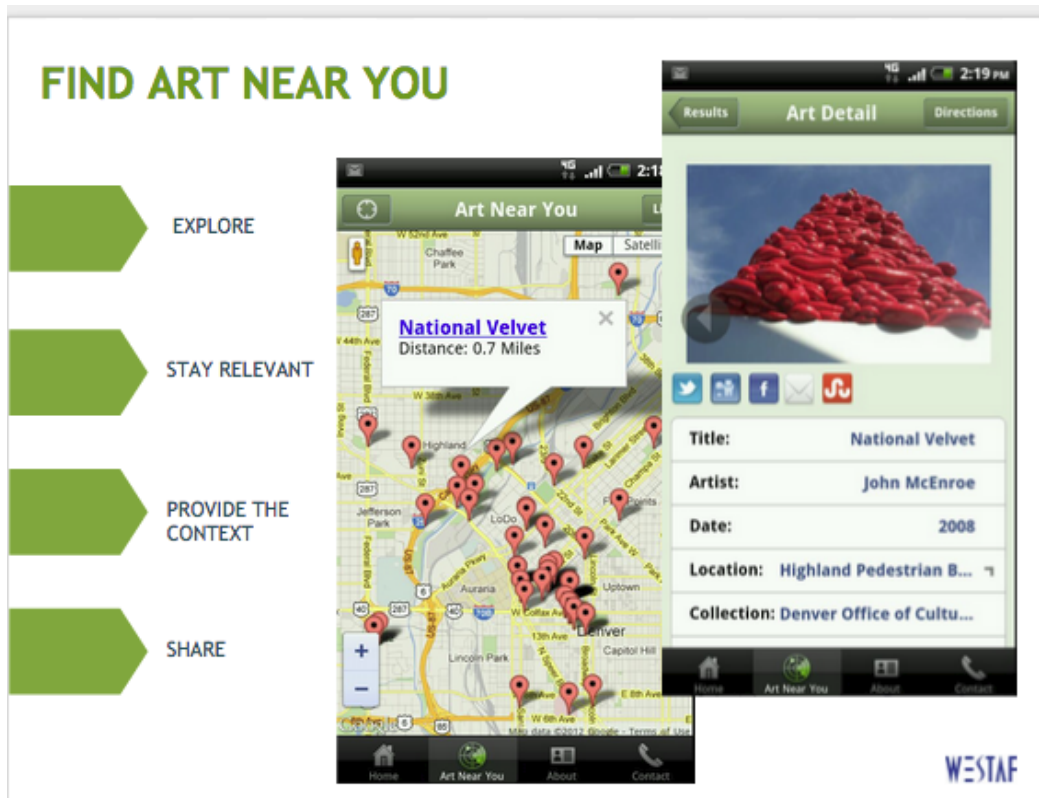
WHAT “marketing staff”?

Many of the classroom participants represented public art programs in smaller (sometimes rural) communities, with only a single public art manager and without dedicated communications staffs or budgets, or in some cases websites (beyond a rudimentary public art page on a local arts council site) or Facebook pages (due to the restrictions of governing agencies). I realized that I shouldn't only present examples from established organizations in urban art hubs, but tailor my presentation at least partially to administrators without as many resources (or as large an audience) at their disposal.

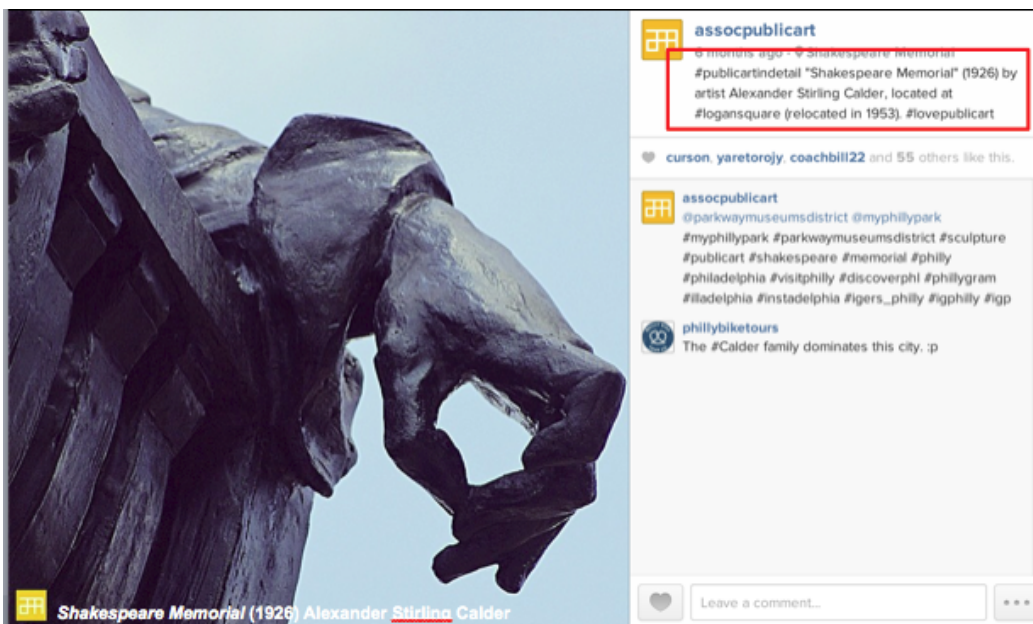
For this reason in addition to presenting a case study from NYC-based nonprofit Creative Time and inviting as a co-presenter Caitlin Martin, digital marketing manager from Philadelphia's [Association for Public Art](#) (aPA) to present aPA's robust [Museum Without Walls](#) app and digital media platforms, I invited Rachel Cain, Program Manager for the [Public Art Archive](#) (PAA). PAA is a database and mobile website of public art collections from around the world. Cain presented the benefits of uploading one's public art collection to PAA as a low-effort, low-cost alternative to creating an original website. PAA also provides social media exposure and a free mobile site and mapping feature to help the public find and learn about each art collection (Similar sites that aggregate online collections include [Culture Now](#) and [Mural Locator](#).)

My co-presenters and I also emphasized simple strategies that any organization can try in order to increase online exposure. For example: creating unique hashtags for each public art project and encouraging the public to post and

tag photos of the work; or searching for related tags and locations on Twitter and Instagram to find, like and share photos and comments that people are already making about the public art.



Slide detail from Rachel Cain's Public Art Archive presentation, demonstrating PAA's mobile collection mapping features.



Sample Instagram post from Association for Public Art, showing the use of searchable hashtags and locations to attract more notice for the post.

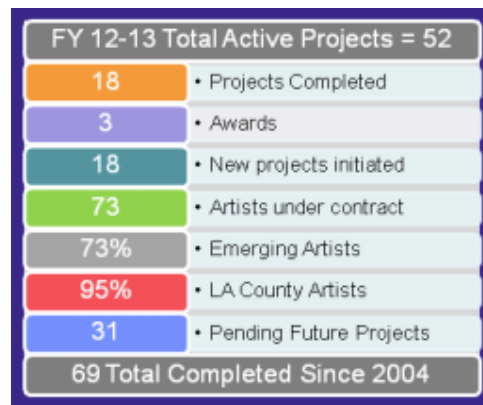
The other three presentations contained a wealth of advocacy, visibility, and collaboration advice applicable to public art programs of all sizes:

The importance of language

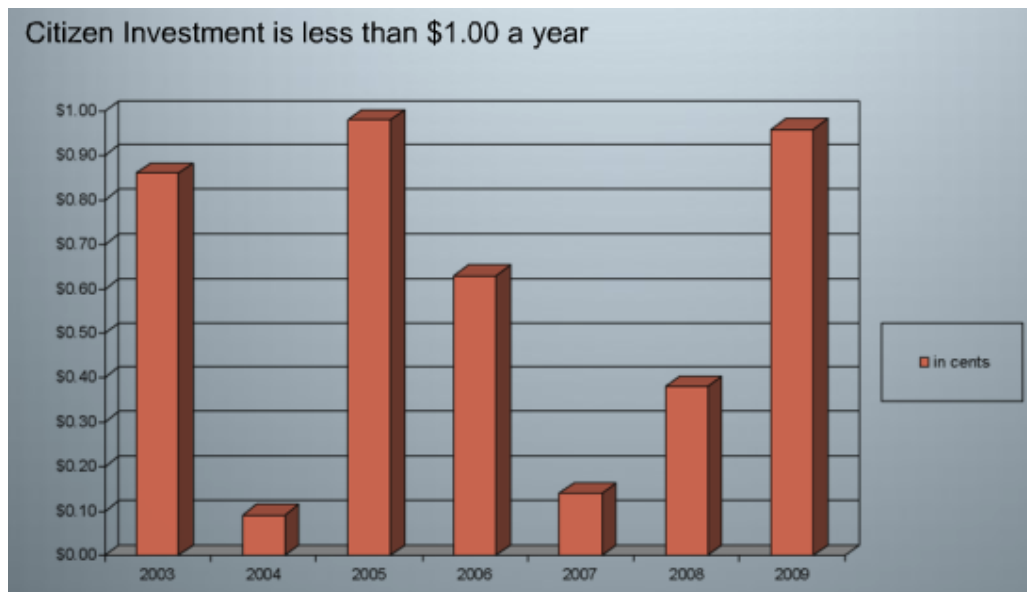
In her introductory webinar, Margaret Bruning, Director of Civic Art at the Los Angeles County Art Commission recommends avoiding the word “marketing” altogether and treating it as synonymous with “community engagement.” Terms like “research and development” or “public input” can also be more attractive to government agencies who might balk at allocating resources to “advertising campaigns.” Whether writing a press release or designing an education program, it is important to tailor your methods and your message to the interests, abilities, AND culture of different audiences. Since the term “public art” itself can be so widely misunderstood, Robin Nigh, Manager of the [Art Programs Division for the City of Tampa](#), suggested “focusing on what public art *does*, not what it *is*,” specifically “the positive impact that art in the public realm can have.”

The importance of documentation—including numbers!

To communicate public art’s value to both government “authorizers” and the general public, Robin Nigh recommended developing a “cheat sheet” with such data as percentage of the city budget used for public art, other funding sources, and the “rate of return:” for example, how many people walk or drive by the work. Both Nigh and Bruning’s presentations were brimming with not only enticing photos and feel-good community testimonials, but easily digestible graphs, charts, and statistics. Nigh recommends the National Endowment for the Arts as a resource for the types of metrics that speak to government officials.



Sample graphic from The Los Angeles County Arts Commission presentation showing annual accomplishments



Sample graphic from the City of Tampa presentation demonstrating taxpayer investment in public art

We can also track number of visits, downloads, likes and comments on a public art app, website or social media page. NYC's [Public Art Fund](#) has cited Twitter and Instagram comments in e-newsletters to demonstrate public interest in its temporary public art installations.

According to Kirstin Wiegmann, Director of Education and Community Engagement at Forecast Public Art in St. Paul, MN, "Sharing examples from [the public art field] from around the world is a great way to...stretch your community's imagination to something very innovative." Forecast's ongoing [Public Art Review](#) journal, website, and large physical library are resources for tracking the latest developments and publications in the field. The Public Art Archive can be mined for exemplary public art in other cities that can help make the case for the value of public art worldwide and get a community excited about an upcoming commission.

The importance of partnerships

To quote Margaret Bruning, "Public art is not something we do TO a community, but do WITH it." Bruning described several projects engaging artists in extensive community collaboration, such as [Project Willowbrook](#). After a "cultural asset study" to determine existing neighborhood cultural resources, artist Rosten Woo went "door to door in order to curate a Home, Garden and Vehicle Tour of Willowbrook," building upon what was already there rather than imposing something new on the community.

Wiegmann cited several Forecast projects co-developed by artists and schools to meet specific educational and physical needs. Carrie Christensen and Anna Metcalfe's Glacier Hills Elementary school [water garden installation](#) taught students engineering and environmental science and helped mitigate sidewalk ice buildup.

Successful partnerships also result in opportunities for cross-promotion and "cultivating public art advocates," in the words of Robin Nigh. Both Bruning and Jared Quinton, Creative Time's Digital Marketing Manager, described partnering with neighborhood groups who know how best to present new projects to their own constituents. For its Fall 2014 [funkgodjazz&medicine: Black Radical Brooklyn](#) installations in Brooklyn in partnership with local history organization [Weeksville](#), Creative Time hired a community liaison to forge mutually beneficial relationships with local businesses,

churches, restaurants, and schools. Creative Time gained access to their promotional channels and provided basic content they could tailor to their own audiences. In return Creative Time brought new audiences and offered increased visibility not only through its digital media, but through some of the public art itself: i.e. free advertising on the community radio station organized by participating artist Otabenga Jones & Associates.

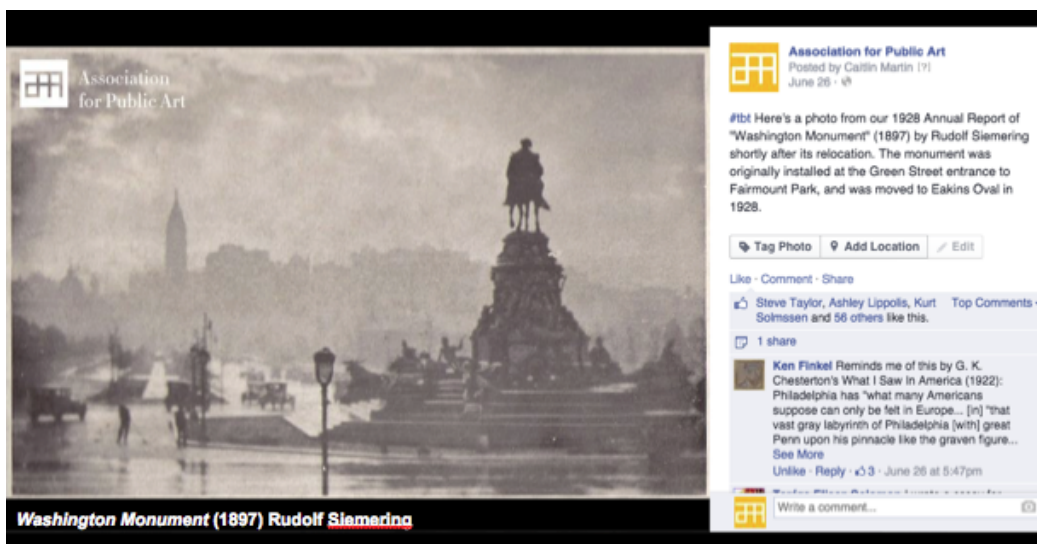


Otabenga Jones & Associates, "OJBK FM Radio" installation in Crown Heights, Brooklyn featuring a community radio station and live events. Photos: Creative Time (left), author (right)



Several administrators of smaller programs described partnering with their cities' museums, tourism bureaus, schools or parks departments to distribute materials like brochures, public art maps/apps, and even public art surveys, include public art in bus or walking tours, and plan joint education programs.

Social media should also be thought of as a form of community engagement rather than advertising. Following, sharing and liking relevant posts by other organizations can result in more organic reach. In addition to the standard announcements about upcoming projects and events, Caitlin Martin of aPA suggested developing participatory quizzes and [photo contests](#) about public art, or themed posts that tie into local traditions or internet trends, such as Benjamin's Franklin's birthday or "William Penn Wednesday" in Philadelphia (See aPA's [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#) for more examples).



Association for Public Art sample themed post tying into the "Throwback Thursday" (#tbt) social media trend. #tbt posts can feature historic photos of artworks or artists coupled with fun historic facts.

The importance of the temporary to the permanent

Temporary commissions and events can spark renewed community engagement with permanent artworks. A [series of site specific performances](#) by Heidi Duckler Dance Theater at the East Los Angeles Civic Center included a public art tour, an outdoor performance with dancers mimicking the poses of sculptures in the fountain, and a curbside discussion. The dancers also involved 70 summer campers in creating their own interpretive dances inspired by civic art.



Image from Heidi Duckler Dance Company's "Public+Art: Three Ducks in a Row" performance at the East Los Angeles Civic Center, 2013

Martin recommended "low budget events with high impact" to also gain new mailing list subscribers and social media followers. aPA has hosted "Instameets" inviting popular local Instagrammers to take photos of public art, [public art bike tours](#), sculpture tango parties, and "flashlight mobs."

Finally, effective educational signage can provide not only pertinent information but opportunities for people to further engage on their own, such as links to websites or [cell phone tours](#). Wiegmann cited several exemplary downloadable public art walking tours (including [Boston](#) and the [Albuquerque Zoo](#)) with questions and activities to guide groups of all ages, all appropriately tailored to audience, artwork and location (i.e., how much time people are comfortably able to spend with each piece).

The importance of involving (and recognizing!) the artists

In addition to hiring seasoned community artists for community collaboration projects, the LA Civic Council builds an individualized community engagement plan into each artist's contract that is "authentic to the artist's practice." Wiegmann described several ways in which Forecast Public Art holds artists at the core of the organization's community engagement work and advocates for best practices, including grants and technical assistance for emerging artists and a "Making it Public" workshop series that trains artists in everything from fabrication to marketing. "Public Art Scramblers" offer opportunities for artists and cross sector professionals to connect.

Artists can also help build a social media presence by creating unique Facebook pages or Instagram accounts for their projects, with regular updates on both construction and public interaction (I cited the example of A Touch of Modern's *Achilles the Giraffe* sculpture from the 2014 FIGMENT sculpture program on Governors Island).



In-progress documentation by A Touch of Modern of their sculpture "Achilles the Giraffe" at the FIGMENT Summer Long Sculpture Program on Governors Island, NYC, 2014, shared on a unique Facebook page and Instagram account created for the sculpture

For *funkgodjazz&medicine*, a project that privileged social practice and temporary events over large-scale easily-photographable sculpture, Creative Time built its [social media](#) campaign around compelling stories and quotes from the artists, including photos of their past work. Quinton recommends social media as a way of also supporting artists' careers by both posting about artists' outside projects, and featuring worthy artists who aren't given actual public commissions with the organization.



Example of a Creative Time Facebook post (on artist Simone Leigh) leading up to "funkgodjazz&medicine" (summer 2014)

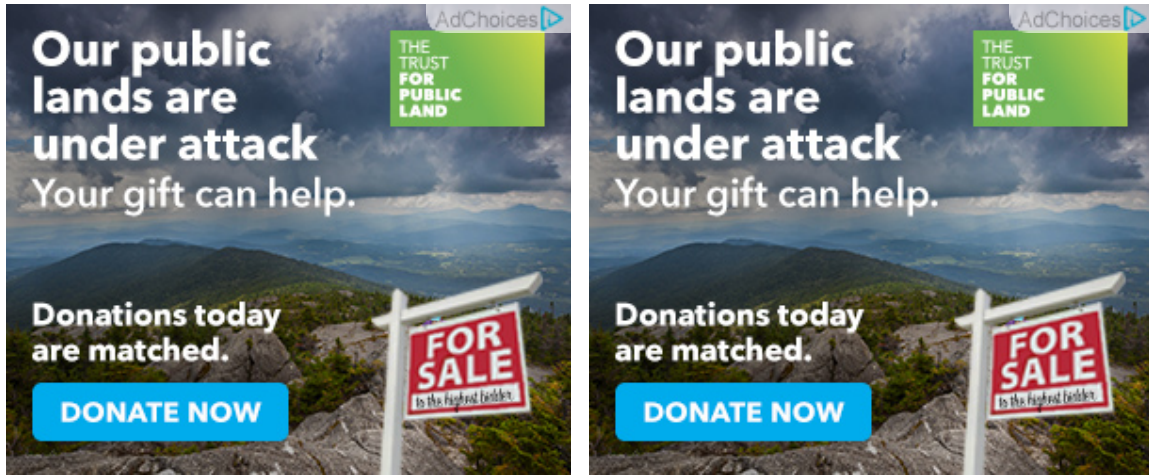
The importance of prioritizing!

For busy public art managers, developing a clear, realistic, and easily communicable marketing and engagement plan is an important first step. Administrators without large support staffs can still identify ways to partner with community groups and artists—both on and offline—to produce, document and share work with maximum relevance and impact, including experimenting with events, education and interactive media. Initiatives like Public Art Archive and Public Art Review are important resources for connecting with the field as a whole for both inspiration and influence.

As a public art administrator, the ability to build engagement into all stages of a project is more important than being a "marketing and PR expert." Overall, this webinar series provided not only some overarching principles to guide this engagement, but some easy and cost-effective strategies.

Which ones will you try?

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