

# Different Entry Points to Art in the Public Realm

by Phillip Barcio

If asked, each Chicagoan may very well have a story about some favorite public aesthetic phenomenon that speaks to them for some special, perhaps deeply personal reason. Indeed, every public artwork offers the public which it serves a unique entry point into the aesthetic realm.

With its massive form and epic reflections, *Cloud Gate* by Anish Kapoor begs us to interact with it, and with each other, offering a whimsical entry point into public art as social instigator and perceptual challenger.

In a much different way, Alison Saar's *Monument to the Great Northern Migration* interrogates gentrified Bronzeville, inviting passersby to stop and investigate who this man with a suitcase is and providing an entry point into public art as a monument to shared history.

Meanwhile, *Daphne Garden* by Dessa Kirk, from its perch in the redesigned Northerly Island, chants a lyrical song of innocence and beauty, reclaiming the lakefront for nature and offering an entry point into public art as cultural compass.

To learn more about the different entry points to art in the public realm, I asked five artists and public art professionals in Chicago to name a favorite local public artwork that they believe offers the public a truly unique entry point into the aesthetic realm. Their answers surprised and delighted me and taught me much I did not know.

Mark Kelly, commissioner of the Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events (DCASE) for the City of Chicago, has worked to broaden the definition of what public art can be since taking over the city's public art program, increasing investments in street art, ethereal art projects, and performance-based works. Not surprisingly, Kelly had trouble narrowing down his choice of a favorite public artwork to just one.

"I love how we supported the Floating Museum's river assembly at the Riverwalk

last year," says Kelly. "I also love how we've re-invigorated Taste of Chicago, bringing visual art and public art into a shared realm along with culinary arts. I also love [to] provide funding for performances as part of Night Out in the Parks. And we've just received a really exciting NEA grant for creative placemaking to help bring artists in to visualize the Maxwell Street Market as a living canvas. Maxwell Street is the longest continuously running open air market in the United States, and we are working hard to push it forward. We see it as one of the great Latinx assets of the city, where food, culture, and art come together."

Inherent in each of Kelly's examples is the notion of creating new settings, new forms, and new ways of connecting artists with the community. His ultimate choice for his favorite public art project in Chicago epitomizes those qualities.

"I guess I would pick the Arts in the Dark Halloween Parade of Artists, now in its fifth year," said Kelly. "It's a parade and a procession of Chicago's creative communities. In the mission statement it says[,] 'no waving politicians, and no sponsorships.' It's a spectacle of artists coming together celebrating what we are and what we believe in—one moment where all of the creative people come together to celebrate our common values. In Chicago, maybe we don't think of parades as public art, because most of them are totally lacking in artfulness, but if we were in New Orleans it would be a normal part of our lexicon. Let us also not forget that Leonardo da Vinci's day job for a long time was a spectacle maker, basically designing the parades of his time."



Alison Saar, *Monument to the Great Northern Migration*, 1996, bronze. Located at Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Dr. at 26th Street. (Photo by the author for the *New Art Examiner*.)



Dessa Kirk, *Daphne Garden*, 2004, scraps of discarded Cadillac cars, dimensions variable. Located at Northerly Island Park. (Photo by the author for the *New Art Examiner*.)

A much different kind of parade was the choice of Neysa Page-Lieberman, chief curator for the Wabash Arts Corridor. Her favorite Chicago public art project occurred on January 21, 2017, when the largest public art project in human history—the 2017 Women’s March—unfolded across more than 600 separate rallies in 82 countries over the course of a single day.

What transformed the event from activism into art was the addition of a simple aesthetic device: a pink Pussyhat.

“I think the Pussyhat project for the Women’s March was the most underrated yet successful public art project in the history of contemporary art,” said Page-Lieberman. “There should be dissertations written about this, and all the different avenues it created for people to enter participatory art.”

Those iconic pink waves seen in aerial pictures moving through the downtown Chicago streets, and

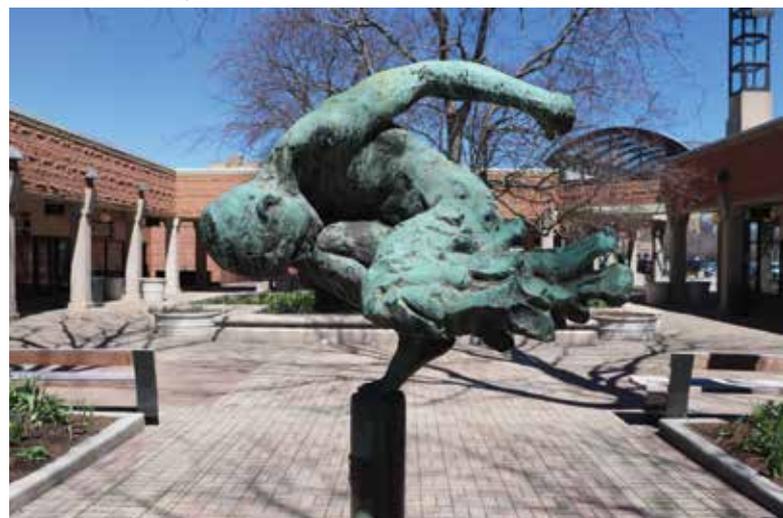
the streets of hundreds of other towns and cities, were the vision of artist and designer Jayna Zweiman and screenwriter Krista Suh. While Zweiman was recovering from an injury in 2016, she realized it would prevent her from attending the upcoming Women’s March. She decided to knit a hat for Suh to wear, so at least she could be there in spirit. Then the two had the epiphany that there were surely countless others in a similar situation who had the time and ability to knit a hat but could not for whatever reason march. They shared the design for the Pussyhat and spread the word on social media, bringing together knitters and marchers and offering a way for those who could not be physically present at the march to participate through the hats they knitted.

“The majority of the people involved did not know they were part of a public art project,” says Page-Lieberman. “I didn’t even know until afterward. We thought we were part of camaraderie but didn’t know it was part of a project that was highly planned out by artists who had thought about it from a variety of different angles. They had imagined this pink wave before it ever happened, and it captured the world.”

Chicago artist Jessica Stockholder, who is internationally beloved for her avant-garde aesthetic interventions, which challenge people’s understanding of their visual environment by creating three-dimensional pictures in space, surprised me by citing as one of her favorite Chicago public artworks a somewhat traditional bronze statue from 1961.

“I have cared a great deal about the sculptures in Chicago near where I live in Hyde Park, as they alter

Paul Granlund, *Jacob and the Angel II*, 1961, bronze. Located in the courtyard of the Hyde Park Shopping Center at East 55th Street and South Lake Park Avenue. (Photo by the author for the *New Art Examiner*.)





Mary Brogger, *Haymarket Memorial*, 2004, bronze. Located on Desplaines St. between Lake St. and Randolph St. (Photo by the author for the *New Art Examiner*.)

my experience of many days,” said Stockholder. “The sculpture *Jacob and the Angel II* in the Hyde Park Shopping Center on 55th Street by Paul Granlund is, unfortunately, now in disrepair. When it is functioning, it is part of a fountain, and the sculpture very slowly turns in the plaza.”

The sculpture is inspired by a story from the Book of Genesis, when the character Jacob is said to be wrestling with a man although he appears to be alone. It seems to imply that Jacob’s struggle was an internal one—that he was wrestling with himself.

“It has a complicated, nuanced surface, which seems to function independently of the depiction it serves, even as it draws one into the drama of the angel and Jacob,” explained Stockholder. “Encountering this uncelebrated, gentle work in the neighborhood regularly opens up many channels of thought and feeling for me. The contrast between the sculpture and the buildings that surround it is marked, and the landscaping is full of care.”

Chicago artist Yvette Mayorga selected not one public artwork, but a series of public murals that over time have come to offer transitional, evolving entry points for members of the public into the ever-changing communal aesthetic realm.

“I choose the murals of 16th Street in Pilsen because of the diversity in time, artists, and activism, and the way in which dialogue is naturally created amongst them,” said Mayorga. “They change and are amended over time and reference current day politics amongst a history of murals that have a long standing in the community created by the community. Specifically, I connect with Sam Kirk’s work, as it displays a variety of women, identifying/not identifying, individuals of different skin tones, ages and nationalities.”

Mayorga pointed out how public art automatically functions on a social and political level, by presenting images of who and what is deemed to be important to the culture that embraces the work.

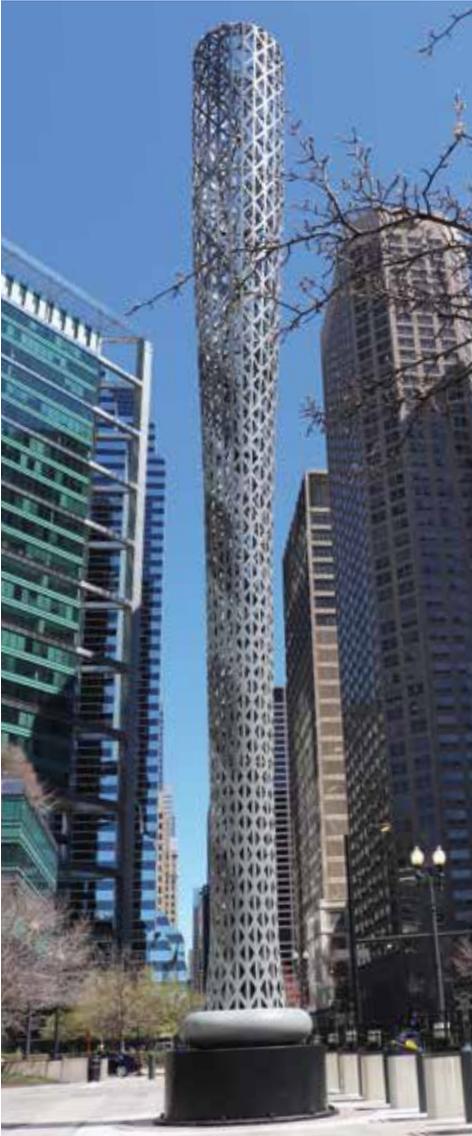
“I chose Sam’s mural because of the importance of representation and visibility of womxn in public art, especially in murals, which is often lacking,” said Mayorga. “Her image is inspiring and serves as a ratification of the presence of womxn. It serves as a visual reminder of a rewriting of history through a public platform.”

Nathan Mason, curator of exhibits and public art for DCASE, said he believes the *Haymarket Memorial* by Mary Brogger offers a unique entry point into public art as historical marker, because of the way it remains open, so members of the public who may have opposing views can encounter a fuller picture of the violent labor protest memorialized in the work.

“In tackling the very difficult question of how to memorialize the events and actions of the Haymarket

Sam Kirk and Sandra Antongiorgi, *Weaving Cultures*, 2016. Located at 1316 W. 16th Street. (Photo by the author for the *New Art Examiner*.)





Claes Oldenburg,  
*Batcolumn*, 1977, Steel and  
aluminum painted with  
polyurethane enamel, 96 ft.  
8 in. H x 9 ft. 9 in. Diameter,  
on 4' x 10' base, located  
at the Harold Washington  
Social Security Center,  
600 West Madison Street.  
(Photo by the author for  
the *New Art Examiner*.)

incident, Mary created an open-ended monument that allows people with very different views on the Haymarket legacy to feel included and respected by the monument,” said Mason. “In the final selection panel conversation of the commissioning process, a labor historian who had long advocated for a straight forward narrative monument assessed Mary’s proposal this way: ‘I started this process thinking we needed a monument which told the story. However, telling the story isn’t the issue. This sculpture communicates the living spirit of the Haymarket and that is what we need.’”

Each of these answers offers something distinctly unique—a personal insight into the myriad entry points that exist, through which we can interact with, and become inspired by, public art.

Whatever our viewpoint is towards public art in general, it is clear that there is no singular method that we are required to undertake when encountering aesthetic phenomena in the public realm. Some public artworks may help us discover new ways of seeing; others may memorialize something in our past; some may point us towards the possible futures; others may challenge our way of thinking; some of the best, for many of us, help us simply be.

**Phillip Barcio is an art writer and fiction author whose work appears regularly in *Hyperallergic*, *IdeelArt*, *La Gazette Drouot* and the *New Art Examiner*. His fiction has appeared in *Space Squid* and the *Swamp Ape Review*. He has work forthcoming in *Western Humanities Review*.**



MadC, *The 1000 Wall*, 2018,  
1326 S. Michigan. (Photo by  
the author for the *New Art  
Examiner*.)

# NEW ART examiner

Established 1973

THE INDEPENDENT VOICE OF THE VISUAL ARTS

Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, New York

Volume 33 No. 5 May/June 2019



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