New Genre Public Art and the Law

Daniel SharpBachelor of Arts 2017

Daniel Sharp is a senior at the University of Michigan studying public policy and art history. His primary focus is on art policy and the intersection of urban planning, policy, and art. In 2015, he founded Art on the Diag (D/ART), Michigan's first public art organization dedicated to showcasing student work; recent projects included Bubbled (October 2015), Mirror Mimesis (March 2016), and Fall Waterfall (October 2016). He is also a DJ and a percussionist.

This piece critiques new genre public art, an artistic practice that emerged in the late 1970s and emphasizes spatial context and social engagement. Using the moveable public artwork Park (2000-2001) by Deborah Stratman, which highlights Chicago's South Side's use and misuse of public space, this paper connects public art and urbanism to reveal contradictions and concerns with their respective legal frameworks. While historicized new genre public artworks emphasize direct engagement and a strictly adhered-to narrative—such as Suzanne Lacy's Three Weeks in May (1977) or REPOhistory's Circulation (2000)—

Stratman's Park operates in the antithesis. Dynamic new genre public artworks, Stratman demonstrates, can purposefully complicate, confuse, and combat their audience while still conveying their arguments effectively. Park's "anti-engagement" with its context becomes a framing mechanism that highlights public art's naïve role in low socioeconomic areas. A work's legal status then reveals to artists and urban planners how an artwork may react to specific audiences, which can be used as a tool to encourage certain reactions to a work's visitors.

eborah Stratman's durational artwork Park (2000-2001) documents the life of parking booths in the South Side of Chicago. Investigating what she defines as the "economic and aesthetic interest in the survival of tiny architecture,"1 Stratman first photographed single-occupancy parking booths placed adjacent to parking lots (Figure 1), then built her own booth and photographed it in urban contexts. Stratman's seven selected locations for her booth included a lot near a highway overpass (Figure 2), empty parking lots (Figure 3), and flush against a small nondescript building (Figure 4). In contrast with the photos of in situ booths, Stratman's booth is fresh and sterile. White paint underscores the word PARK printed black on the bottom half of her two-by-two foot structure, while the top half's thick Plexiglas allows the viewer a glimpse into the space. Black metal beams and a flat black roof support the structure. Stratman then screwed a black box inside, with the words TAKE ONE stickered onto the front and open to anyone who walks inside. The box contains brochures (Figure 5) that offer Stratman's explanation of the work.2 However, left unoccupied and unmonitored throughout its installation, the booth was appropriated, misused, tagged, cleaned, and inevitably stolen.

Park engages in the complex question of how a public artwork can engage its audience beyond that of pure aesthetic appeal. Public artwork is defined here as any artwork located outside. Public artwork created in the late 1970s onward, however, aimed to not only establish a conversation with its context but also engage with the people who live within that context. Pioneered by works such as Suzanne Lacy's *Three* Weeks in May (1977) in Los Angeles, the new socially engaged public artwork—defined as new genre public art—aimed to elicit a response to their often temporary public artworks. Personto-person dialogue between neighbors, city officials, artists, visitors, and the media became a primary technique of new genre public art for the remainder of the 20th century. But Park is purposefully disengaged. Standing empty and alone, it offers not an engagement but an anti-engagement, forcing Stratman's audience to either accept the booth's legitimacy or deny it, offering a different technique to "engage" with an audience.

Park additionally questions the value of the urban legal infrastructure in economically depressed neighborhoods. When compared to contemporaneous public artworks such as the law-abiding REPOhistory's Circulation (2000) in New York City, Park's illegality reveals how certain aspects of urban management and the law of private property can function differently dependent on the context, which proves crucial for artists and urban planners to understand if





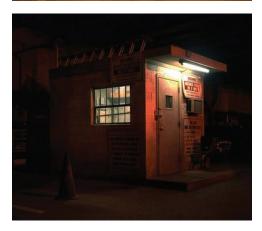


Figure 1 Photographic selections from Park (Stratman, 2000).

they are to engage in public artistic projects and specific constituencies.

Stratman invites her audience to respond anonymously to *Park*'s claim to South Side properties, prompting artists and urban planners to reexamine the definition of new genre public art and investigate the effect of legal and illegal artwork on its context and audience.

Reexamining the Definition of New Genre Public Art

Figure 2 shows Park situated on a plot of land running alongside a highway overpass. The highway, on its way into the air, provides the booth with a tan stone backdrop. A large steel truck emerges from the left of the photograph behind a grated fence and a few roadside bushes. The sky dotted with clouds is pushed to the top of the photograph. The viewer is placed far enough from the booth to notice how no one is pictured in the photograph. It leads us to imagine how certain viewers reacted to the booth. Some may have seen the booth as legitimate, parking their cars nearby as the booth assumed a level of safety. Others may have not seen it at all, letting the booth blend into the backdrop of puddles, weeds, and urban banality. A neighbor might have assumed the booth to be a brand-new city installment or a new illegitimate venture by a con man. Whitewashed graffiti along the stone wall behind the booth indicates that graffiti artists and city cleaners have visited the place; the booth could have been tagged and/or cleaned by the respective parties.

As viewers, we can recognize how others would immediately read *Park* in different ways, be it a banal structure, a municipality invasion, an opportunity to con others, a new canvas, or another object to clean. This assumption turns

out to be entirely true. The booth experienced heavy use and damage throughout its two months and eight locations, including nearby valets who used the booth as a base of operation; graffiti artists who tagged the booth only for city cleaners to wash and repaint the booth after being tagged; a scam artist who occupied and used the booth as a legitimate structure to unsuspecting drivers; curious visitors (both near and far) who stuck their heads in to see the inside; and an unknown visitor who stole the booth from Figure 1's position in late April of 2001.³

Stratman's use of deliberately unattached and indirect communication with her various viewers stands in stark contrast to traditional new genre public artwork. Suzanne Lacy's Three Weeks in May (1977) (Figure 6), an oft-cited archetype of the genre, uncovered the lack of awareness of Los Angeles's rape reports. For three weeks, Lacy invited artists to perform publically, draw with chalk on sidewalks, engage in free defense training classes and conversations with over 30 organizations, and dialogue with the media to directly engage in public policy. Documentation of the work emphasizes the direct interaction between artist and viewer: videos and photographs show artists holding signs in front of crowds, painting maps publically, drawing bodies on the street, and debating with passersby.

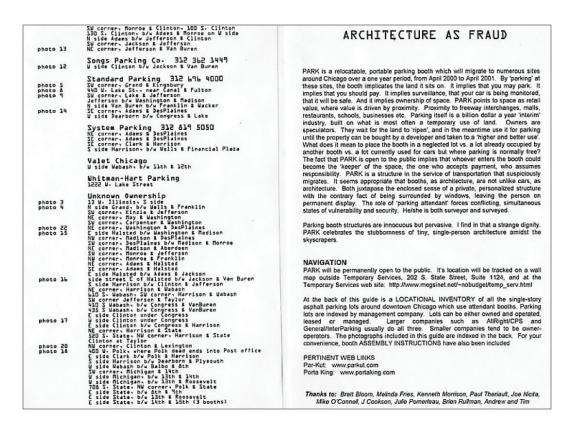
The multimedia, multi-stakeholder, and sociolegal engagements of *Three Weeks in May* avoid abstract or indirect concerns and instead engage in conversations on public policy and the law.⁴ The new genre public artist's role shifted from a theorist posing questions to an organizer engaging in answers.⁵ Stratman, however, contrasts these principles with *Park* in two ways. First, viewers are met with an inanimate object, not a person. Without an artist, docent, or activist standing nearby, a viewer is left without guidance. And if one were to use the booth for

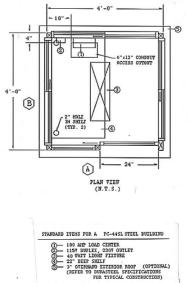




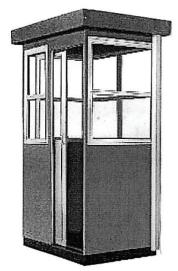


Figure 2 - 4 (from top) North side of Archer between Arch and Haynes (approx. 2930 South), NE corner of VanBuren and Sangamon, North Side of 31st Street at Morgan (Stratman, 2000).









one's own agenda or purpose (e.g., by tagging or stealing the booth), one would be met not with a conversation but with a cleaning and removal of the booth. Communication, therefore, between Stratman and her audience is indirect, disjointed, and incomplete. Stratman engages her audience by using alternative, oblique techniques without relying on panels or protests like *Three Weeks in May*.

The second method Stratman uses that contrasts with Three Weeks in May is the avoidance of documenting the work's interaction with its visitors, misusers, and defenders. In order to defend its "success" at engaging an audience, the documentation of discussion and dialogue becomes a crucial aspect of new genre public art. Park's photographs, however, concentrate on the booth and its context without anyone in the pictures. Such a decision can appear selfindulgent to new genre public artists because it emphasizes the work as an isolated, "art for art's sake" object-not a catalyst or forum for a larger, greater discussion between constituents. However, one can reframe Stratman's abandoned pictures as highlighting how public artwork can miss its mark. While public art can engage and activate space, it does not guarantee a social, positive interaction with its audience or space. It further reveals how one can wrongfully assume that "engagement" is inherently a beneficial, visual interaction. Park, in this instance, is "antiengaged": it offers nothing for its audience, save for an artificial sense of security, and in return it has no defense against the con man or the graffiti artist. Stratman's definition of engagement, therefore, is one of indirect, isolated associations and phantom visitors like that of Rachel Whiteread's *House* (1994) or Ann Messner's *Meteor* (1987), rejecting the need to document the work's "engagement" with a presupposed audience and instead visually isolating the work to reveal its potential downfalls.

Ultimately, the work does suffer from its own inconclusiveness. Attempting to discover the point of *Park*, other than the ease at which one can appropriate and misuse urban space, is a challenge unlike the clear intention of Three Weeks in May. What Park advocates for, however, might be for us to question the intent of urban infrastructures and those who claim their purposes. How best to use urban space is subjective, and its current use might ignore the needs of the overall community. Creating impromptu parking lots does little to aid the South Side in dire need of economic and infrastructural attention, highlighting spaces that could be parks, hospitals, businesses, or schools. Instead, the booth becomes a visible punching bag by its context, and by pinpointing the dangers of leaving spaces unattended, it advocates for the better use of those spaces.

Park, in sum, is a unique and quietly subversive new genre public artwork. Not only does it possess the key elements of the genre—dialogue with an audience, activist in nature—it flips these elements by creating an indirect, complex web of assumptions and reactions that the audience at the time or after the work can choose to navigate or not. Socially engaged art can "succeed" in its message without having to directly "engage" in an audience, which offers us a more expanded definition of new genre public art and new tools to discuss topics in public spaces.

Reexamining the Law of Public Art

As a noun, *park* is defined in the Oxford dictionary as "an area devoted to a specific purpose"; the verb *to park* identifies a vehicle being brought to a halt and left temporarily, typically in a car park or by the side of the road. The legal definition of *park* in the City of Chicago resonates with these descriptions,



Figure 6 Leslie Labowitz, Record Companies Drag Their Feet, from the project by Suzanne Lacy, Three Weeks in May (Labowitz, 1977).

requiring all parking facilities and spaces on private property to be licensed by the City.⁶ Nonlicense holders or peddlers (such as Stratman in this context) who attempt to use private land for their own purposes are strictly limited to four legal exceptions:

- 1. An outdoor sale conducted by a business served by the [owner's] parking facilities; or
- An occasional outdoor sale in support of a tax-exempt charitable, educational, religious or philanthropical institution or organization...; or
- A special event presented by, or pursuant to permits issued by, the City; or
- 4. A farmers' market conducted pursuant to Chapter 4-12 of this Code.⁷

Stratman's parking booth does not fall within any of these narrowly defined exemptions to the parking ordinance. It additionally violates municipal code 4-264-060, where "[no] secondhand dealer shall make use of any property, private or public, not included within the licensed premises, for the storage, handling or display of any secondhand article."

Yet *Park* managed to evade prosecution while hiding in plain sight. This section reveals Stratman's methods so that artists can incorporate her strategies and public space stakeholders can see how new genre public artworks can prove difficult to legally address.

Stratman counters the legal repercussions of trespassing through three carefully considered aesthetic decisions. First, the spatial context of Chicago's South Side allows Stratman to dodge property law. One could argue that the Chicago Police Department, land owners, and neighbors had more urgent issues to address in the South Side in 2000 (e.g., violent crime, homicide) than a trespassing parking booth. If Stratman placed Park in a parking lot, park, or street corner in Chicago's Loop-where property is closely maintained, organized, and partitioned because of its high economic value—Park would have been reported, stolen, or destroyed quickly. Private trespasses, like the kind undertaken in *Park*, are regulated by private land owners or their appointed agents who must file claims for damages against alleged trespassers in the local court system. The enforcement is maintained at different intensities depending on the land's value and the relative amount of local economic activity. Stratman's ability to place Park for weeks without legal intervention in the South Side demonstrates how contexts with low economic activity and low land value sometimes escape enforcement of private trespasses due to absentee land owners and weak neighborhood social connections. These areas prioritize other concerns over the legal rights of landowners, and Stratman reveals and exploits this distinction.

Second, while it is the responsibility of a private landowner to remove *Park* from private land, it is difficult to ascertain who would be responsible for reporting the trespassing structure on public land. Is it the duty of the Police Department,

City officials, or community members? The lack of clarification and municipal ambiguity create a quasi-bystander effect, diffusing the responsibility to report Stratman's booth. And even if someone had reported the booth, Stratman could have safeguarded *Park* by claiming her right to free speech. With this logic, *Park* functioned like a flyer or traveling political advertisement, moving from one street corner to another to disseminate information, and not, say, generate revenue illegally.

Third, independent of whether *Park* was on public or private land, Stratman could protect *Park*'s afterlife by citing U.S. copyright law. Photographing architecture without the property owner's permission is allowed when it is "located in or ordinarily visible from a public place." Stratman's photographs are always from the street perspective—a public place where one can ordinarily view the buildings and parking lots that *Park* holds hostage. Additionally, attempting to take down Stratman's photographs of the work after the completion of the project would prove difficult.

Park demonstrates the extent to which unexpected, legally ambiguous art can reveal the law's uneven application across different contexts. Stratman successfully usurps the law of private property, appropriating private land without leading to repercussions because of its strategic positioning in a neighborhood that deprioritizes property law and its photographs that frame *Park* as a docile, free speech oriented public artwork. The methods downplay Park's direct violation of Chicago city codes and allow it to successfully dodge legal concerns. And a concerned citizen, property owner, or urban planner is encouraged to avoid legal battles with new genre public artworks as they may prove difficult to prosecute. Contacting the artist and/or property owners directly ultimately proves to be a better



Figure 7 REPOhistory, Circulation (public art intervention), paper sign designed by Gregory Scholette, Manhattan (Scholette, 2000).

alternative to address the work's illegality.

Illegality in New Genre Public Art

The previous two sections revealed how *Park* catalyzes a reexamination of new genre public art and bypasses property law. It leaves us, however, with a few unfinished considerations: is illegal new genre public art like *Park* inherently more effective at addressing its concerns than public art that plays by the rules? If so, will we see increasingly dangerous, daring, and illegal public artworks that perpetuate the radicalization of public space? The artist collective REPOhistory's work *Circulation* (2000), as an example of legal new genre public art, acts as a foil to *Park* to answer these questions on the efficacy of illegality in artworks.

REPOhistory aimed to "repossess" history through the use of infographics either printed onto metal street signs and clamped onto lamps or printed and taped onto street signs. ¹⁰ Organized protests, printed material, gallery shows, performances, and maps provided additional context to the precise historical

narratives REPOhistory attempted to rearticulate (Figure 7). The group set its eyes on the history of blood for *Circulation* both as a metaphor for identity and a physical entity that has been unequally distributed across New York City. ¹¹ The project began in February of 2000 and lasted two months, incorporating work from over 25 artists across Manhattan. ¹²

The collective exchanged its staple medium (metal signs clamped onto public streetlights and lamps) for mass-printed posters taped at eye level on street signs and roadside poles for Circulation. The intentional shift likely responded to the collective's previous work Civil Disturbances (1998-1999), for which the City nearly denied giving permits to REPOhistory after businesses complained about the signs. 13 Circulation, as a result, avoids legal rebuttal by using posters whose ephemerality allows a potentially frustrated viewer to simply tear down the work without having to use the courts. In addition, extensive research, multiple meetings, and several proposals for Circulation lasted over four years to confirm the project's legal right as free speech and obtain approvals from multiple public space stakeholders in New York City. 14 These included the New York City Department of Transportation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, The Gunk Foundation, The Puffin Foundation, Pratt Institute, Parsons School of Design, and multiple galleries.

Yet while *Circulation*'s investment in its own legality satisfies some stakeholders, others may find its rule-following unadventurous or bland. When placed in conversation with *Park*, the two works reveal how audience members, depending on their background, react to a work's (il)legality. Three categories emerge: people who live near the work (neighbors, businesses, frequent passersby), people who live far from the work (likely artists or curators visiting for a brief moment), and people

who work with the space (municipal workers and private property owners).

Circulation's by-the-book relationship with its spatial context encouraged positive interactions by the people who live near or work with the space.15 Park, in contrast, did not, noting the tagging, misuse by a con man and valets, and theft of the booth. Viewers who fall under this category are likely to have hostile, confused, or ambivalent reactions to new constructions and artworks. Foreign objects serving a foreign purpose are unlikely to be trusted until they are cleared by friendly, professional, or legal methods. Circulations's desire to be approved by any and all stakeholders serves this purpose and gave the work legal weight and trust from these categories. Park's legal instability, at first a noted strength in the work, is here a downfall to those who value by-the-book public artworks. Its value and purpose are questioned in perpetuity only to make its artistic and aesthetic conversation difficult to sell to these groups.

The audience that lives far away from the work has an inverse relationship to the work. The average curator, artist, or adventurer visiting the work likely views its artistic narrative first without having to grapple with the work's unsanitized and legal relationship with its surroundings. To bypass these legal concerns is to give the benefit of the doubt; it allows the artistic community to somehow morally allow, if not celebrate, the bending and breaking of the law. Park, existing in a grey area between illegality and legality, piques their interest. Circulation's reliance on City and stakeholder approval, however, ossifies its radical message, appearing stodgy and conservative. We are able, to an extent, to predict how and why certain viewers appreciate or vilify a public artwork's illegality.

The inevitable question *Park* and *Circulation* answer is why illegality matters in one's reading of a public artwork. The question especially reverberates when the artwork deals with public policy or art's relationship to the law. A viewer cannot help but see and consider a public artwork's relationship to its outside space, where variables from neighbors, to taggers, to the law must converse with the work. Its effectiveness and reading relate not to the power it has to realize social change but its propensity to talk to its surroundings. ¹⁶ The quality of discussion that arises then becomes dependent on where the viewer lands within the three categories.

Stratman's *Park* offers overlooked insights into public art planning and the law. The work asks

us to reexamine the boundaries of new genre public art, arguing for a more expanded definition of audience engagement to include indirect, indifferent, or even hostile interactions. Artists' planned community "engagements" need not be limited to beneficial or agenda-driven topics; indirect, even antagonistic, interactions between artwork and viewers are valid and should be treated with the same complex analysis. This piece placed Park historically (via Lacy) and concurrently (via REPOhistory) with the legal concerns it raises, hypothetical lawsuits, and the efficacy of illegality in public artworks. Further considerations include discussing the efficacy and ethical differences between illegal artworks that were caught by the law or "escaped" the law, as well as the role of duration in public artworks to escape repercussions.

Endnotes

- Nato Thompson. Experimental Geography. (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2008), p.54.
- 2. Text from the brochure can be viewed at http://www.temporaryservices.org/parkbook.html.
- 3. Stratman, email correspondence, November 29, 2016.
- Lacy, Suzanne. Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art. 3rd ed. N.p.: Bay Printing (1994). Print, p. 24-25.
- 5. Thompson (2008), p. 54.
- 6. City of Chicago code § 4-4-337 Illegal use of parking facilities.
- 7. Ibid.
- 8. City of Chicago code § 4-264-060.
- 9. U.S. Copyright code § 120 Scope of exclusive rights in architectural works; Illinois Right of Privacy Act; and Brown v. ACMI Pop Division, 375 Ill. App. 3d 276, 283, 873 N.E.2d 954, 959 (1st Dist. 2007).
- 10. Jim Costanzo. "REPOhistory's circulation: The migration of public art to the Internet." Art Journal, 59(4) (2000): p. 32.
- 11. Ibid. p. 33.

- 12. The overall number of participants, however, differs depending on the source—be it Gregory Sholette, Tebor Scholz, Jim Costanzo, or Janet Koenig; see Costanzo (2000), Sholette, G., & Scholz, T. (2000). This is likely due to how specific collaborative projects led by Keith Christensen, Meryl Meisler, Oscar Tuazon, and Andre Knight sourced a vast network of staff and students that may or may not be reflected in the total number of those "participating" in the artwork. The numbers do not count, in addition, the city departments that sanctioned the project, which oftentimes become willing participants; see also Costanzo (2000), p. 32.
- 13. Diller, Matthew (1999). "COLLECTION: CIVIL DISTURBANCES: BATTLES FOR JUSTICE IN NEW YORK CITY REPOHISTORY." The Fordham Urban Law Journal, vol. 26, pp. 1320-30.
- 14. Gregory Sholette, & Tebor Scholz. "REPOhistory: Circulation." *Art Journal*, 59(4), 38-53 (2000): p. 1-3.
- 15. Gonzales (1998), n.p.
- 16. Patricia C. Phillips. "Temporality and Public Art." *Ant Journal*, vol. 48, no. 4, (1989): www.jstor.org/stable/777018, p. 332-336.

Figures

Figure 1. Deborah Stratman, selections from *Park* (photographs), 2000. © Deborah Stratman, viewable online at http://www.pythagorasfilm.com/park.html

Figure 2. Deborah Stratman, Park (steel 2x2 angle iron - (4) 7'2" (2) 3'2" (2) 4'2" 1x1 angle iron - (1) 7'2" (2) 7' (2) 3'2" (2) 4' (2) 25" (4) 23" + miscellaneous steel sizes for sliding door track wood (2) sheets exterior grade 1/2" plywood (2) boards of 2x4 plexi (2) 4' x 3'2" & (2) 3' x 3'2" (2) 2" metal wheels clear silicone caulk liquid nails WD-40 clear coat polyurethene spray), North side of Archer b/w Arch and Haynes (approx. 2930 South), April 2000-April 2001. © Deborah Stratman, viewable online at http://www.temporaryservices.org/parkmap1.html

Figure 3. Deborah Stratman, *Park* (booth), NE corner of VanBuren and Sangamon, 2000. © Deborah Stratman, viewable online at http://www.temporaryservices.org/parkmapl.html

Figure 4. Deborah Stratman, *Park* (booth), North side of 31st Street at Morgan, 2000. © Deborah Stratman, viewable online at http://www.temporaryservices.org/parkmap1.html

Figure 5. Deborah Stratman, *Park* (brochure), details, 2000. © Deborah Stratman, viewable online at http://www.temporaryservices.org/PARK.pdf

Figure 6. Leslie Labowitz, Record Companies Drag Their Feet (video), from the project by Suzanne Lacy, Three Weeks in May, Los Angeles, 1977. © Leslie Labowitz.

Figure 7. REPOhistory, *Circulation* (public art intervention), paper sign designed by Gregory Scholette, Manhattan, 2000. © Gregory Scholette, viewable online at http://www.gregorysholette.com/?page_id=71

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