

The Dual Turn of Contemporary Public Art: From Being Collected to Becoming “Public”

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Abstract. This paper explores the evolving meaning of “publicness” in contemporary public art amid increasing privatization, shifting curatorial practices, and the expanding influence of market-driven cultural policies. Once defined by their physical presence in civic spaces and accessibility to diverse audiences, many public artworks now undergo spatial, legal, and symbolic transformations. Some are removed from the public realm and absorbed into private collections, while others are reintroduced foundations, corporate displays, or philanthropic initiatives. These developments blur the boundary between public good and private interest, raising questions about visibility, participation, and cultural ownership. Through case studies of Banksy, Richard Serra, and Augusta Savage, this research examines how changes in ownership and institutional control reshape not only access to art, but also its collective meaning and socio-political resonance. Drawing on Tony Bennett’s theory of the “Exhibitionary Complex” and Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital, the paper argues that the value of public art lies not in static placement or legal designation, but in its ability to engage memory, foster dialogue, and remain visible to the public. Ultimately, it calls for a collaborative approach between private and public actors to preserve the cultural and civic functions of public art in a time of systemic transformation.

Keywords: Art, Privatization, Cultural Capital, Exhibitionary Complex, Re-publicization

1. Introduction

Public art has long been recognized as a vital cultural practice within urban space, serving not only decorative purposes but also acting as a medium for democratic expression, collective memory, and social participation. From monuments to street murals, the value of public art lies in its accessibility—being seen, used, and shared by a diverse public. However, in recent decades, with the rapid growth of the art market and increasing influence of private capital, public art has undergone a structural transformation that can be described as a dual turn: on one side, artworks originally situated in open, communal spaces are being absorbed into private or institutional collections, stripping them of their original public function; on the other, private collections are being reintroduced into the public eye through curated exhibitions, branded cultural spaces, and philanthropic initiatives—a process of strategic “re-publicization”.

This essay examines the shifting definition of “publicness” in contemporary public art by analyzing how private ownership and institutional control reshape the way art is viewed, accessed,

and valued. Drawing on Tony Bennett's concept of the "Exhibitionary Complex" [1] and Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital [2], this paper explores the ways in which power, space, and visibility intersect in the governance of art. This paper argues through a series of case studies—including works by Banksy, Richard Serra, and Augusta Savage—that the true value of public art does not lie in who owns it, but in whether it remains accessible to the public. Ultimately, the paper suggests that being seen, remembered, and collectively experienced is what sustains the social and cultural power of public art in a time of increasing privatization.

2. The privatization of public art and the transformation of publicness

In recent decades, the boundaries between public and private ownership of art have become increasingly blurred. Public artworks, once commissioned for communal spaces and designed to engage broad audiences, increasingly confront removal, resale, or recontextualization within private or institutional settings. This shift signifies more than a change in physical location; it entails a fundamental transformation in the meaning, function, and accessibility of public art. As works are transferred from streets, parks, and plazas into private homes, corporate lobbies, or auction rooms, their public visibility and socio-political context are often diminished or entirely erased. Such transitions prompt a critical examination of who has the right to access, preserve, or profit from art that was once created for public engagement.

One of the most emblematic cases of this trend is Banksy's mural *Slave Labour*, originally painted on a wall in North . The work quickly became a local cultural landmark, satirizing globalized child labor through the image of a boy sewing Union Jack flags. In 2013, however, the mural was mysteriously removed from the wall and later surfaced at a private auction in Miami. Although the sale was eventually halted due to public outcry, the incident illustrates how ownership rights can override communal attachment and public sentiment. The work's symbolic power was inherently tied to its site-specific context; removed from that setting, its political critique and accessibility were both compromised.

A similar trajectory can be observed in Antony Gormley's installation *Another Place* (1997), which comprises 100 life-sized cast-iron figures installed along Crosby Beach near Liverpool. Originally intended as a temporary exhibition, public and institutional response ultimately led to the work's permanent acquisition and regulated management by Sefton Council. While the work remains in situ, it has increasingly become part of a formal tourism and marketing strategy for the region. Gormley's figures, once solitary meditations on space and body, are now integrated into a controlled institutional narrative. The transition reflects a subtle shift: from spontaneous public experience to regulated, commodified cultural encounter [3].

A more systemic example of privatization can be seen in the valuation and sale of British municipal art collections. In 2023, Sotheby's offered to assist cash-strapped local councils in the United Kingdom by valuing—and potentially auctioning—pieces from their public art inventories [4]. While this practice offers short-term financial relief, it also represents a profound reconfiguration of public cultural heritage into private assets. As artworks once considered civic treasures are evaluated through market logic, their function shifts from public edification to private investment. The transformation of art into liquid capital risks erasing shared cultural narratives that define communal identity and memory.

These cases can be understood through Tony Bennett's concept of the Exhibitionary Complex [1], which describes how museums and public displays have historically functioned to produce civic subjects through visual education. Within this framework, the displacement of public art into private domains undermines its pedagogical and civic potential. No longer part of a civilising public

program, privatized artworks cease to function as instruments of collective memory or social critique. Instead, they become mere possessions—subject to the whims of market demand and elite preference.

Moreover, legal and cultural critiques of this process reveal deeper tensions. As Gilden argues, property law often prioritizes private ownership over the public's moral and cultural claims to artworks, leading to legal disputes that obscure broader ethical considerations [5]. Similarly, Tushnet highlights how visual art in public and private spaces is governed by an uneven regulatory landscape, wherein protections for cultural access remain weak or inconsistent [6]. Morrill further critiques how the commodification of public art erodes its democratic function, transforming shared aesthetic experiences into exclusive privileges [7].

In sum, the privatization of public art represents not merely a shift in location or ownership, but a transformation of meaning, use, and value. Once embedded in public space and collective consciousness, these works now face the threat of invisibility, reinterpretation, or erasure. As ownership transfers from cities to collectors, and from communities to capital, public art risks becoming a symbol of exclusion rather than inclusion—a commodity rather than a communal asset. As Rosenbush notes, even the relocation of public art into private domestic settings reflects a broader trend of artworks moving “off the street, into the home,” highlighting how privatization changes the very conditions of visibility [8].

3. From private collections to public re-publicization

In the evolving landscape of contemporary art, private art collections are playing an increasingly role in shaping public cultural experiences. no longer confined to elite domestic interiors or exclusive viewing rooms, many privately owned artworks are now being exhibited in publicly accessible spaces—ranging from shopping malls to foundations, from airports to urban parks. this shift marks an important counter-movement to the privatization of public art discussed in the previous chapter. it reflects not only the desire of collectors and institutions to contribute to cultural life, but also the growing public appetite for diverse, immersive, and visually engaging cultural experiences. in this sense, private re-publicization offers an alternative model of curatorship—one that is more flexible, audience-oriented, and often more responsive than traditional state-driven cultural planning.

A similar impulse the Rockefeller Foundation's longstanding involvement with public art. Through partnerships with museums and universities, the foundation supports projects that bring privately funded artworks into public dialogue. Their collaborations are often designed to address social issues—such as climate change or racial equity—through the lens of artistic expression. The result is a form of curated citizenship, where the public consumes visual culture and participates in broader societal narratives.

However, the effectiveness of such private-public initiatives becomes most evident when juxtaposed with government-led failures. A compelling counter-example is Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* (1981), a large-scale curved steel sculpture commissioned by the U.S. General Services Administration and installed in Manhattan's Federal Plaza. Serra's work radically transformed the site, bisecting the open plaza and reshaping its circulation. While the artist intended the piece to provoke contemplation about space and power, many office workers and city users saw it as obstructive, even authoritarian. After years of controversy and public hearings, the federal government voted to remove and dismantle the sculpture in 1989—despite widespread criticism from the art community [3].

This incident illustrates a profound disjunction between government curatorial authority and public expectation. The removal of Tilted Arc did not merely mark a logistical decision but signified the fragility of public art when it lacks sustained public engagement and curatorial transparency. The work was never reinstalled elsewhere, and Serra himself insisted it could not exist in any other context. Yet had a private institution or cultural foundation intervened—offering to exhibit the work in a more controlled, audience-sensitive environment—it might have preserved the artwork and its provocative dialogue with space.

In this context, the idea of re-publicization through private stewardship emerges as a viable strategy. Privately managed cultural spaces often possess the logistical flexibility and audience outreach capacity that rigid government systems lack. While commercial interests are undoubtedly at play, these institutions frequently adopt participatory models that aim to bridge the gap between curatorial vision and public reception. Through active branding, community programming, and collaborative partnerships, they can shape cultural narratives in ways that resonate more effectively with contemporary audiences.

Theoretical insights from Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital help contextualize these developments. According to Bourdieu, institutions and individuals accumulate symbolic power by associating themselves with culturally legitimate practices and artifacts. By re-presenting art in accessible, dynamic formats, private collectors and foundations do not merely gain prestige; they also mediate cultural taste, establishing themselves as arbiters of value in the public eye. This negotiation between visibility, access, and identity forms the basis of re-publicization as a curatorial model [2].

The case of Tilted Arc also demonstrates how such re-publicization may avoid the pitfalls of government cultural planning, which is often driven by bureaucratic constraints or ill-informed populism. Private platforms, while not immune to critique, tend to employ more nuanced audience research, storytelling strategies, and contextual framing. These tools allow them to deliver cultural experiences that are simultaneously more inclusive and more resilient.

In conclusion, while private curatorship introduces the risk of market-driven aesthetics, it also fills a critical void left by state disengagement or curatorial misjudgment. The transformation of private collections into public exhibitions is not merely a spatial shift—it is a curatorial reimaging of how and where public art can thrive. Johnson similarly observes that taking art “public” often requires negotiation between accessibility and institutional control, reminding us that re-publicization is not free from ideological stakes [10]. As such, re-publicization through private means should not be viewed as a threat, but as an important supplemental pathway—one capable of reconciling artistic integrity, public demand, and institutional sustainability.

4. The secondary market and functional transformation of public art

As public artworks increasingly enter the secondary art market, their roles within civic space are redefined. These pieces, once created to serve as shared cultural experiences, are often stripped of their original historical and social contexts when commodified. Removed from their intended environments, such works risk becoming disconnected from the communities they once served. While this transition can signify cultural loss, it also highlights the potential for rethinking privatized public art through institutional strategies. In some cases, transferring ownership to private or semi-private institutions can allow works to be preserved, restored, and, crucially, re-publicized under controlled and sustainable conditions. The secondary market, therefore, presents both a threat to public memory and a potential mechanism for its preservation—if balanced by thoughtful curatorial policies and institutional responsibility.

One striking example of this shift is the sale and relocation of decommissioned monuments and Olympic sculptures. Often displaced due to changing urban landscapes, financial strain, or political reevaluation, these public artworks are sold into private hands. Though some are later displayed in private museums or sculpture parks, their symbolic public roles are inevitably altered. A monument once tied to national identity or collective remembrance may lose resonance when uprooted, reframed, or isolated within elite collections.

A more poignant case is Augusta Savage's *The Harp* [11], created for the New York World's Fair. Inspired by the poem *Lift Every Voice and Sing* by James Weldon Johnson, known as the Black national anthem, the sculpture stood sixteen feet tall and featured a choir of stylized Black figures forming the strings of a harp, supported by a protective arm and hand. The piece served as a powerful metaphor for racial pride, cultural solidarity, and social uplift. Yet, due to financial and material limitations, *The Harp* was constructed in painted plaster rather than bronze, and like many temporary installations of the Fair, it was destroyed after the event. Only miniature souvenir replicas remain today [11].

The destruction of *The Harp* illustrates how institutional and funding limitations can erase significant cultural contributions from the public realm. If a private foundation had collected and conserved the work, offering continued public access, it could have maintained its relevance and visibility in the historical narrative of African American art. In this light, *The Harp* exemplifies not only what is lost when public art is not preserved, but also what might be gained through coordinated privatization with a public mandate.

Scholars such as Luukkanen-Hirvikoski [12] and the Nonprofit Quarterly [13] have warned of how the secondary market often dismantles the collective identity functions of public artworks. Yet these same scholars also point to emerging institutional models where private collections and corporate sponsors actively maintain public access to significant works. This suggests that when privatization is accompanied by regulatory frameworks and cultural commitments—such as exhibition requirements, educational programming, or urban visibility standards—it may actually serve as a form of “curated re-publicization”.

Rather than treating privatization as antithetical to public interest, this chapter proposes it be understood as a negotiable process. Strategic curation by private foundations, museums, or collectors—especially when incentivized or guided by policy—can preserve public art's cultural significance even when ownership changes hands. The coordination of public visibility with private stewardship may thus offer a pragmatic and resilient model for safeguarding the civic role of art in an era of financial and spatial constraint.

Although the entry of public artworks into the secondary market risks commodification and cultural erasure, structured forms of re-publicization can serve as effective alternatives. When private collectors or institutions take on the responsibility of maintaining a work's public accessibility and cultural visibility, they may serve as an invaluable hedge against the failures of public planning or funding. Adler further argues that the increasing role of private influence in shaping public cultural goods complicates the very future of art history, underscoring the importance of balancing market logics with civic responsibility [14]. *The Harp* serves as a tragic yet instructive reminder: public art should not vanish due to market forces or material neglect. Its preservation—whether public or private—must remain a shared priority if we are to retain art's role as collective memory and symbolic identity.

5. Conclusion

This paper thus argues for a balanced approach in future public art policies, where private and public interests, market logic, and institutional frameworks work in tandem. The goal is to ensure that public artworks remain visible, accessible, and culturally resonant. Ultimately, the publicness of art is not a fixed condition but a process—sustained through ongoing dialogue, inclusive curation, and shared responsibility. Public art retains its cultural and social meaning only when it continues to be seen, engaged with, and interpreted by diverse publics. As the Artelier guide to public art emphasizes, successful long-term strategies must treat public art as both cultural investment and communal resource, ensuring its relevance for future generations.

In today's reality, neither state-managed nor fully privatized approaches can always guarantee meaningful connections between art and the public. Instead, the dynamic between privatization and re-publicization may function as a viable strategy to preserve public relevance. Private collections can offer more flexible and sophisticated curatorial methods, addressing issues often found in government-led initiatives—such as bureaucratic rigidity and failure to meet public expectations. Conversely, effective public policies and legal frameworks are necessary to ensure that privatization does not sever the cultural relationship between art and the broader community.

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