Overleaf:
Cliff Tresner; sculpture, metal; Louisiana State University Sculpture Park:
Baton Rouge, Louisiana
Working with Galleries

Many artists who work in the public art arena are not gallery affiliated, but public art administrators should learn to work with galleries and the artists who are affiliated with them. Public art is different from studio art, and artist-gallery relationships based on studio art models will not necessarily work for public art projects. Administrators should recognize and understand the relationships between artists and galleries, and artists and galleries need to understand the special considerations of public art projects. Public art provides new and different opportunities for artists, but it requires a different kind of artist-gallery relationship. Each situation—each project, artist, and gallery—will be different.

Every effort should be made from the inception of a public art program to establish a good working relationship with galleries in the region. However, each gallery is different in the services it offers its artists, the kind of art it shows, and the artists it represents. Galleries supply varying degrees of services to artists, ranging from simply hanging work and selling it for a commission to total management of an artist’s career. These differences will affect how a program deals with the artists represented by each gallery.

Usually galleries will have contracts with the artists they represent, but contracts rarely cover every situation that may come up. Often galleries have contracts with artists specifying that the gallery alone represents the artist in a specified region and is entitled to a certain percentage of all sales in that region, including public art commissions. However, public art involves a contractual relationship between a program and the artist, not between a program and the artist’s representative. Most public art projects involve new work, so the gallery’s role in inventory, storage, cataloging, exhibiting, advertising, and other usual services is minimal. However, when existing work is being purchased, the purchase price should include the gallery’s commission.

Gallery directors may not immediately see the difference between art sold to a corporation for its public spaces (lobbies and plazas) and art commissioned for a community’s public spaces (parks, playgrounds, and libraries). One important difference is that a community public art project requires the artist to interact with many different parties. A corporate purchase rarely involves anyone other than the gallery, the corporate representative, and the artist.
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Gallery directors may not immediately recognize this difference, but the distinction between community public art programs and corporate clients is essential. Problems may occur if gallery representatives and artists assume that working with community-oriented public art programs is the same as working with corporate clients.

The artist may decide to share the artist’s fee with a gallery if the gallery has been involved in the proposal submission. Some galleries take the lead by submitting an artist’s work or portfolio in response to calls for proposals to public art projects, occasionally without the artist’s knowledge. Program administrators should insist on a statement from the artist that he/she is aware of the project and committed to carrying it out if selected.

A public art program may require artists to show any fees or commissions paid to a gallery in their project budget. Juries may have reservations about a significant amount of the project budget going to a gallery commission. While this may put gallery-represented artists at a disadvantage, it is a legitimate issue for a jury to consider.

Public art administrators should encourage gallery-represented artists and their gallery directors to discuss public art opportunities before an imminent public art commission so that they can both consider how to respond. This discussion is between artist and gallery, and resolution may take some time. Administrators may need to provide artists and galleries with information about the nuances of public art projects, but they must respect the decisions artists and galleries make about working with the program.
William Binnings; The Natural Conservationist; sculpture, bronze; Pontchatoula, Louisiana