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City Groups Find Friendly Rivalry in Bringing Art to Public Spaces

By RACHEL DONADIO
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Think a moment of the Tribute in Light beaming mournful and triumphant in this spring's lower Manhattan skyline, or of Jeff Koons' riotous chia-puppy on view last year at Rockefeller Center. Look at the witty installations in the greenery of Madison Square Park or listen to the sound loop now rolling in an old open-roofed warehouse beneath the Brooklyn Bridge.

Evocative, provocative and elusive, like the equestrian statues of generations past, these works today embody public art in New York City. And although most people don't realize it, they aren't brought to you by the city.

Instead, they are the work of Creative Time and the Public Art Fund, two private, not-for-profit institutions that over the last 25 years have sponsored hundreds of such installations throughout the city, changing the definition of public art along the way.

Trouble is, with such similar missions, few people can tell them apart. Their names are displayed together as often in the corrections page as in the art reviews. But by all accounts their competition has been a largely positive force, with the groups not so much competing for scant resources as pushing the envelope of public art in a city with an insatiable appetite for the bizarre.

"It would be honest to say there is a kind of friendly competitiveness," the director of the Public Art Fund, Tom Eccles, said of the two groups. "I think that's a strength. I think this city is big enough for five organizations."

"Susie Freedman and I joked that the two organizations should just become one," the director of Creative Time, Ann Pasternak, said of the president of the Public Art Fund.

Not that Ms. Pasternak would want to, mind you. "It's better to have two organizations doing as much for the public as possible," she said. "The more we do the merrier we all are."

Still, people do confuse them. "They really do, which I think is a compliment," Ms. Pasternak said.

"I love the Public Art Fund!"

(For the record, the Tribute in Light by Paul Myoda and Julien LaVerdiere and Bill Fontana's sound installation are Creative Time's, while the Koons and the art in Madison Square Park are the Public Art Fund's.)

Their interests sometimes overlap. Ms. Pasternak admits that she wanted to produce the Jeff Koons puppy.

Both wanted to display a Jeff Koons puppy.

"Sometimes Tom and I step on each other toes and we talk and say, 'I was interested in this person, what are you up to?'" Ms. Pasternak said. "We do sometimes trip over sites with one another," she said. But they also "help one another out with advice and contacts."

"I think in a way we're more likely to pay attention to what an artist is doing or what the Whitney is doing than Creative Time," Mr. Eccles said.

Inside observers spot subtle differences between the two groups. "Creative Time has been a little edgier. They've done less civic-minded stuff," said the executive director of the Queens Museum of Art, Tom Finkelpearl,

who did installations for both groups in the 1980s. "A lot of the Public Art Fund projects have been tied to urban development."

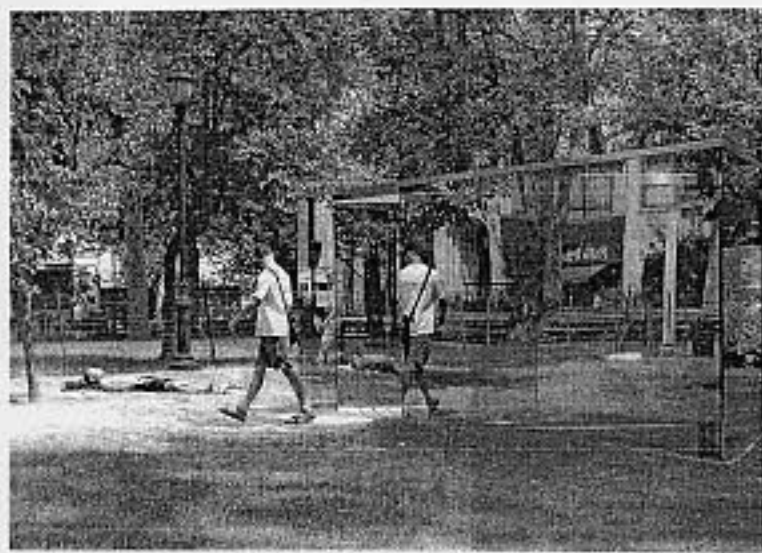
Recent Creative Time projects include the Brazilian artist Vic Muniz skywriting cartoon-like clouds in the sky, and Chris Doyle projecting images of jumping people onto the white marble facade of 2 Columbus Circle.

The group used the anchorage of the Brooklyn Bridge for art for 20 years until security concerns displaced them after September 11. In the early 1980s they sponsored Art on the Beach, installations and performances on the landfill that became Battery Park City.

"The thing that distinguishes



PUBLIC ART In 'Wink,' Takashi Murakami suspended inflatable sculptures in Grand Central Terminal in a 2000 project sponsored by Creative Time. Please see story on the group and the Public Art Fund, page 4.



PUBLIC ART Dan Graham's 'Bi-sected Triangle, Interior Curve,' is on view through October as part of the Public Art Fund's Target Art in the Park.

us is a willingness to experiment, to focus on temporary works," Ms. Pasternak said. "We're very multidisciplinary," she said. "No one field is more important than the next."

As evidenced by "Consuming Places," their current installation in Dumbo which involves video works by Asymptote, Greyworld and Marjetica Potrč, in the six years Ms. Pasternak has been its director Creative Time has focused more on new media.

The Public Art Fund, meanwhile, has had a steady gig for the past few years in Madison Square Park, where Target has co-sponsored art installations, including ones now on view by Dan Graham, Mark Dion, and Dalziel + Scullion. The fund commissioned Rachel Whiteread to build a white water tower on lower Broadway in 1998.

They sponsored works in Central Park as part of this year's Whitney Biennial, including a metal tree by Roxy Paine and siren sculptures by Kiki Smith. (Creative Time worked with the Whitney Biennial in 2000 on a project involving palm pilots.)

"One of the most important things we can do is say you don't have to be scared of contemporary art," Mr. Eccles said. The group's goal is "to provide a kind of poetry in public spaces," he said. "I sound kind of romantic!" the Glasgow native added with a laugh.

"Tom Eccles drags artists kicking and screaming into the public realm," said Mr. Dion, an artist who's worked with both groups.

"One of the big differences is that maybe Creative Time has more of a subtle political agenda in that they work with artists who really engage the community in very direct ways," Mr. Dion said.

Founded in 1972 by Anita Contini — who is now leading a committee to build a memorial at Ground Zero — Creative Time came out of the alternative space movement of the 1970s, where artists combed the city looking for funky sites to make art. Its mission was "to help artists experiment, to bring artists outside the confines of galleries and museums," Ms. Pasternak said.

The Public Art Fund always had a strong civic component. It was founded in 1977 by Doris Freedman, who also championed the Percent for Art program. Ms. Freedman's daughter, Susan, is its current president. From the start its goal was to help artists cut through red tape. "It tried to find a legal framework for artists to work in public spaces," Mr. Eccles said.

Both consult to corporations, with the Public Art Fund working with Forest City Ratner's Metrotech center in Brooklyn and Creative Time working with Panasonic to show one minute of video art each hour on one of the screens in Times Square.

High-ranking members of the administration are linked with both. Patricia Harris stepped down from the board of the Public Art Fund when she was named deputy mayor for administration this year, while Amanda Burden did the same from Creative Time's board to become planning commissioner.

Creative Time's annual operating budget of just under \$1 million is divided equally between public funding, private foundations, sponsorships and earned income, and individual donors, Ms. Pasternak said. It has no endowment.

The Public Art Fund has an annual operating budget of about \$2 million, divided almost equally between money from foundations, corporations and individuals. It receives 5.5% of its budget from public sources and has an endowment of \$1.3 million, which Mr. Eccles called "more like a rainy day fund."

Both say they find strength in transience.

"We're trying to give people a very powerful experience of contemporary art that's possible when you're making temporary installations," Mr. Eccles said. "That's a strength in a way, kind of a virtue of our methodology."

For Creative Time, the Tribute in Light proved the point most succinctly.

"If anybody thought that art doesn't mean anything to the general public," Ms. Pasternak said, "this project proves otherwise."