

# The Future of Chicago Public Art Forms

by Phillip Barcio

**W**hat do you visualize when you read the phrase “Public Art”? A bronze statue of a man on a horse? A large-scale painting on the side of a building? A gargantuan, abstract form plopped in a downtown plaza?

Hundreds—perhaps thousands—of such works certainly reside in Chicago’s public art collection. For generations, they have contributed to the understanding of the city’s artistic legacy and what being a Chicagoan means in terms of civic identity.

Yet, a growing contingent of the city’s diverse, eclectic contemporary public is starting to understand just how insufficient our city’s somewhat limited historical approach to public art has been when it comes to fulfilling our complex cultural needs.

We are starting to grasp how every public aesthetic phenomenon influences the rollout of human culture. The sculpture in the park is public art, but so is the park itself. The mural on the side of the building is public art, but so is the building. The object created by the artist is public art, but so is the ethereal, performative act of its creation.

Architecture, fashion, billboards, traffic signs, protests, sounds, smells, the hard surfaces of sidewalks and streets—all of it activates our built world with meaning; all comes embedded with messages about who and what we, as a public, are, and what the character and purpose of our culture might be.

To capture more of the thoughts about what the future of Chicago public art might look like, I reached out to three visionaries working within the field: Stephanie Cristello, Allison Peters Quinn, and Neysa Page-Lieberman. All three work directly with artists, community members and civic leaders—though in distinctly different ways—to shape Chicago’s public art landscape.

Their thoughts on how our city’s public art infrastructure is evolving to meet the needs of an ever more enlightened and collaborative community confirm that we have a lot more than simply monuments and murals to look forward to in coming generations.

## The Subversive Plant

Stephanie Cristello is the founding editor-in-chief of *THE SEEN*, described as “Chicago’s International Journal of Contemporary & Modern Art,” and the artistic director of Expo Chicago. For the past four years, she has also served on the curatorial committee for a unique public art project called *VERRIDE*.



Stephanie Cristello, Editor in Chief of *THE SEEN*.

“*VERRIDE* is an ephemeral exhibition that’s installed throughout the Chicago City Digital Network (CDN),” says Cristello.

CDN includes dozens of digital billboards placed in high-visibility locales along major traffic arteries around the city. Each billboard constantly flips through a series of advertising messages. The City of Chicago gets a certain number of flips on each billboard for their announcements.

“They’ve donated one of their flips to us,” says Cristello. “So every 12 flips, we place an artwork on one of those digital billboards. We have a program of 10 to 15 artists per year who run on the CDN. This year the exhibition will run two weeks before EXPO and close two weeks after.”

“What makes it unique is that a lot of these billboards are experienced from people’s cars, when they’re driving on the freeway,” explains Cristello. “We interrupt the advertising, so it’s unclear whether what you’re seeing is an artwork, an experience, or an ad.”

By appropriating a marketing medium and subverting it as a venue for a temporary aesthetic intervention, *VERRIDE* blurs the boundary between advertising space, civic messaging, and public art. It challenges the expectations many members of the public have about how art intersects with their everyday life. Instead of having to go to where the art is, the art visits them in at an unexpected time and place. And instead of being proselytized to buy a service or product, viewers

receive an invitation to a moment of transcendence—a fleeting reminder that we are creatures of beauty, culture, complexity, and surprise.

“Last year we commissioned Theaster Gates to make an installation of images from his *Black Madonna* series,” says Cristello. “The works were derived from the Johnson Publishing archives. The images come from an advertising language, and are all black and white, and really striking. So between these advertisements on the CDN, you would get an image that was intended for an ad, but it was just the image, without the advertising language.”

Such uncanny visions fluttering before our eyes as we roll slowly by a billboard in bumper-to-bumper traffic engage us in an immediate critical analysis of the constructed environment—and also might empower some of us to start interrogating the meaning of what we see on other billboards.

“The artwork is supposed to serve as a provocation,” says Cristello. “We received feedback that it was clear that something was different, that something was off. But I think we would all be a little misguided if we thought that everyone who’s viewing these billboards somehow knows that what they’re seeing is an artwork. The important thing for us is that it can operate on multiple levels. For viewers who are part of the art world, or for people who are not part of the art world, it gives the public a new kind of image that becomes part of their lexicon.”

Amanda Williams, *VERRIDE* | A Billboard Project, curated by EXPO CHICAGO in partnership with the City of Chicago and the Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events. Photo by Assaf Evron.

## The Bean and the Bread

Allison Peters Quinn is the director of exhibition & residency programs at the Hyde Park Art Center (HPAC), which was founded in 1939, making it the oldest continuously operating alternative art space in the city. It also remains among the most innovative, particularly in the ways it mobilizes the methods and lessons of socially engaged art.

“I think sculptures and murals are primarily what people in Chicago think about when it comes to public art,” says Quinn. “But the more productive moments are the ones that are more experiential. When I came back to Chicago in early 2000, I noticed this momentum of artists working through social networks to create their own art happenings open to the public. This felt very different from the art scene in New York, which is way more insular and market-driven.”

Quinn recalls one weekend back in 2003 when a group of emerging artists took over a vacant lot in Humboldt Park and set up a sort of free art carnival. “It



Allison Peters Quinn, Director of Exhibitions & Residency Programs, Hyde Park Art Center. Photo by Tony Smith.





Amber Ginsburg and Joe Madrigal, *K[ne(e){a}d]*. The Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago.  
Photo courtesy of the artists and Hyde Park Art Center.

was such an unassuming location for people to engage with art, which took the form of terrarium ice cream, an inflatable igloo, a Piggly Wiggly checkout counter-turned-DJ booth,” says Quinn. “That kind of encounter really brings people into the imaginative experience and expands their idea of what public art can be. Now, we have the genre of social practice art that locates artists’ work in response to civic injustice and is strongly anchored in Chicago. Here at the Hyde Park Art Center, we open our five garage doors on the façade of the building so that artists can present art work that requires people to spontaneously interact with them and their work right there on the sidewalk.”

One of Quinn’s favorite such moments was when Chicago artist Amber Ginsburg performed her ongoing project, *K[ne(e){a}d]*, at HPAC.

“Ginsburg set up on the sidewalk and invited passersby to help her prepare bread as a way to discuss the history of cooking in relation to the ceramic tradition of making vessels,” said Quinn. “We baked the bread in our kilns in the ceramic studio at the Art Center and then everyone ate the bread together. The people who stopped weren’t expecting to encounter public art in this way. It gave them a chance to be part of a conversation.”

The challenge, Quinn acknowledges, is that it is more difficult to find funding for socially engaged performance projects like *K[ne(e){a}d]*. “It’s about the

question of art and value,” she says. “If it’s something visible that culturally fits in with how we traditionally define art in museums—a painting, sculpture or photograph—it’s easier for a public official to claim it as artwork. The material object is important for some officials, to be part of a permanent legacy, something lasting. It’s more difficult to see the conversations or personal relationships started by a socially-engaged art project that exists in perpetuity.”

Quinn points out, however, that we are seeing a shift in Chicago right now in terms of what types of public art we value.

“It takes a moment for funders to catch up with what artists are doing. But some Chicago-based funders are already there. The Joyce Foundation, for example, is seeing the necessity of artists working in conversation with the community through these situational works. They support the artists making the connections, rather than putting the weight on the actual object.”

Furthermore, social practice public art allows artists to react immediately to constantly changing cultural concerns, making the work relevant to the public in real time.

“These sorts of works are ephemeral, but not everything can be the Picasso sculpture, or *The Bean*,” says Quinn. “Both are what make this city great. We need *The Bean* and we need the bread. We need the combination.”

## Monuments to the Many



Neysa Page-Lieberman,  
Executive Director,  
Department of Exhibitions,  
Performance and Student  
Spaces, Columbia College  
Chicago. Photo by the author.

Quinn's insights into some politicians and major funders' need to create a lasting legacy suggest that, whatever trends emerge at the vanguard of public art, those old bronze monuments won't be going away any time soon. That does not mean, however, that future monuments have to resemble those of the past.

Neysa Page-Lieberman is executive director of the Department of Exhibitions, Performance and Student Spaces at Columbia College Chicago. She

is also the chief curator of the Wabash Arts Corridor which, since 2013, has steadily grown into one of the most substantial concentrations of large-scale public murals in the country. Initiated by Columbia College, the project enables students, faculty and staff to partner with local, national, and international artists, as well as property developers, business owners and civic leaders in a cooperative effort to transform their aesthetic environment.

Her experiences working on the Arts Corridor have taught Page-Lieberman crucial lessons about the need for collaboration when it comes to successfully instigating aesthetic public phenomena. Collaboration, she believes, is key to imagining what the future of public monuments will be.

"There's been a lot of talk about taking certain monuments down," she says. "We're taking down things that people say don't represent us. I'm interested in what goes up in their place."

Supplementing her efforts in Chicago, Page-Lieberman has also been working with Monument Lab, a Philadelphia-based group, which engages institutions and members of the public in exploratory conversations around how issues like history, collective memory, justice, and equity are expressed through public monuments and through the use of public space.

"Over two years, they set up five sites where they had a lead artist running community conversations and workshops," says Page-Lieberman. "They interviewed people, asking who and what they would like to see a monument to. Their surveys included asking people to draw out what they wanted to see. At the end, they produced a report consolidating the public's suggestions and presented it to the city. The dominant feedback: people are interested in seeing monuments to groups, not individuals. A lot of people drew pictures of people holding hands."

People today are resisting the idea of the hero, she explains. The myth that one person achieves something monumental and thus must be memorialized in metal or stone in some highly-trafficked public space does not ring true to contemporary viewers.

Page-Lieberman asks, "How many single people can we mount monuments for? No one does anything alone. We're interested more in monuments to groups, moments, and movements."

The thought of group monuments inspires me. Taking Page-Lieberman's idea along with the perspectives of Cristello and Quinn, I am inclined to believe we are living in a highly exciting time for Chicago public art—a time when members of the public are embracing their own agency to experiment with what kinds of aesthetic phenomena are manifest within the public realm.

Rather than bickering about the cost or the controversy around a public artwork or debating whether we "like it" or "get it," we might finally get around to more important things, like listening to each other's ideas about what defines our common culture; deciding for ourselves how our communal environment might look, sound and feel; expanding the definition of who and what the public is; and affirming the universal character and purpose of our built world.

**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*.**

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