

New public art paves way for dialogue

•Public will have no sculpture say.
•The committee's selection was democratic and unrepresentative of the taste of a midwestern majority and their culture.

•If a sculpture is necessary, it should at least be heroic.
Those are excerpts from stories and letters that appeared in the Grand Rapids Press in 1967-68 regarding a proposed abstract sculpture for that city by internationally-known artist Alexander Calder.

Much of the same rhetoric has appeared in several recent letters to the Birmingham-Bloomfield Eccentric objecting to a proposed public sculpture by Alice Aycock, planned as a signature gateway for all of us to downtown Birmingham.

For example, Birmingham resident Pietro M. Di Giorgio wrote in the June 13 Eccentric, "Have we all gone mad? Birmingham should be renamed River City, because Professor Harold Hill came into town and sold us a pile of worthless metal resembling a collapsed roller coaster and we poor yokels are going to install it as a representation of our town."

Both its proponents and those who are unhappy over the proposed

Aycock construct might remember that, historically, public art has been controversial but that the perception often changes over time.

For example, John Beardsley notes in "Art in America" that the abstract character of the Grand Rapids sculpture was derided in letters to the editor and a song ridiculing the project was aired on a local radio station.

But that city ended up adopting the Calder as its official symbol. And the pride residents came to take in its Calder became the impetus for Grand Rapids to install other pieces of world-class public art.

Back in the 30s, and even closer to home, many well-connected members of the public wanted the Diego Rivera frescoes whitewashed off the walls of the Detroit Institute of Art. Objections concerned its subject matter and stark contrast with the surrounding Renaissance-style patio.

Now, of course, the DIA is renowned for the Rivera murals.

And the clamor over a public sculpture for Milwaukee by Mark di Suvero, some of whose works you can view through June 30 at the Hill Gallery in Birmingham, provided the



JUDITH DONER BERNE

impetus for the Milwaukee Art Museum exhibition on "Controversial Public Art, from Rodin to di Suvero" in 1983-84.

Like Rivera, Calder and di Suvero, Alice Aycock is internationally recognized. As an important American 20th Century artist, her work is found in major collections throughout the world including the Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim, Metropolitan and Whitney Museums in New York City.

She recently inaugurated a piece for the new San Francisco Public Library and is currently at work on an installation for Rutgers University.

The project was initiated by the

Cultural Council of Birmingham-Bloomfield and Aycock was selected by a panel which included local gallery owners, artists and architects from an original list of 27 recommended internationally-known artists.

The white metallic 36-by-120 foot sculpture she has conceived for Birmingham has the whimsical, playful design seen in her recent sculptural roof installation on FDR Drive at 60th Street in Manhattan.

According to New York Times arts reporter Carol Vogel, that "giant, looping aluminum spiral weaving gracefully through the sky" transforms the city's waterfront.

Aycock says the sculpture she designed for Birmingham is about "celebration, euphoria." It references the area's system of expressways that carry you along, then move into, out and over one another. "It's a kind of a pathway that leads into the air in an energetic, dynamic way."

"I've spent a lot of time in the Detroit area," says Aycock. "It's a long, flat view from the road. Then you get to a point where there's sort of a parting of the road, almost like a

ribbon that moves and snakes or twists."

As the dialogue concerning the piece continues, it might be important to remember that throughout history the artist has often been out there ahead of us.

"What is familiar is comfortable and the shock of the new often makes clear perception impossible," wrote Milwaukee Museum Director Gerald Nordland about the inevitable — and exciting — controversy over public art.

"Artists, architects, city planners, civic leaders and responsible citizens must not focus on the unfamiliar," he wrote, "but recognize that fresh and original forms in public art can be a force for education, for raising the spirits of a community, establishing a hub for new civic activity and for a new prideful self-respect."

Judith Doner Berne, a West Bloomfield resident, is former managing editor of the Eccentric Newspapers. You can comment on this column at (313) 953-2047, Ext. 1897 or by writing or faxing a letter to the editor of this newspaper. To contribute to the sculpture fund, phone (810) 988-7ART.

Vouchers help families 'trapped' in public schools

The era of big government may be over, as President Clinton has said, but that doesn't mean everyone has heard the news. Tim Richard's recent article, "Vouchers are a plot, not parent 'option'" was a desperate attempt to prop up the worn-out idea that government is the only one that can do a good job of educating our children. Michigan parents aren't buying it — they want more school choice.

Michigan has many fine public schools, but too many are turning out children who can barely read their diplomas. In the Lansing School District encompassing our state capitol, two-out-of-every-three fourth and seventh graders fail to achieve basic reading standards on Michigan tests.

Parents don't want to be forced to send their children to such schools just because the government runs

them. Increasingly, parents want the freedom to choose for themselves the best school for their child, including private and religious schools. And the majority of Michigan voters believe the state should support them in that choice.

In a February 1995 Detroit Free Press survey, 61 percent of voters supported enacting a voucher program that would provide state-supported scholarships to students choosing to attend private or religious schools. Most voters no longer see the need for a ban on such aid. In fact, many find it detrimental.

When asked if they would support voucher-style choice if it excluded religious schools, support actually dropped to 41 percent. In an era of



PAUL N. DEWEESE

moral crises, a growing number of people find it hard to understand why the state would deny education dollars to families choosing schools that provide a strong values education.

Parents like myself also find it hard to understand the agenda of those like Mr. Richard who oppose providing a child any educational

opportunities outside government-run schools — even when he or she could clearly learn more elsewhere. Mr. Richard argues against a proposed law enabling high school students to take advanced courses from local colleges. But does he really think it's in the best interest of the student to hold them back from a head start on college just so the local public school can keep its chairs filled?

President Clinton proposes providing poor families trapped in failed public housing projects with vouchers for private apartments or houses. Why not do the same favor for families trapped in failed public schools? What could be more important than providing their children with a better education and the hope of escaping

poverty?

After all, we don't tax ourselves \$11 billion each year to support an education establishment. We do it for our kids. Those public schools which do a good job of educating our kids have nothing to fear from more parental choice. And for those that don't, choice gives parents a simple way of holding them accountable for improvements.

Paul N. DeWeese, an emergency room physician in the Lansing area, is founder and chairman of TEACH Michigan Education Fund, 913 W. Holmes, Suite 265, Lansing 48910-0093. The acronym stands for: Toward Educational Accountability and Choice.

Media must share blame for corrupt political campaigns

The election season is approaching. Pretty soon the airwaves will be filled with sound bites and the TV screens with negative ads. Charge and counter-charge will be the order of the day.

Now, before all this overwhelms us, is a good time to pause and reflect on the state of our politics.

One way or another, I've been either covering or participating in American politics for 30 years. I have never seen such negative content and uncivil tone as today infests our political process.

It isn't enough merely to disagree with your opponent on the substance of policy. It seems necessary these days intentionally to malign your opponent's character, question his morality and distort her record.

Much of this, I submit, has come from the general emotional power of political advertising on television and, in particular, on its most recent manifestation, the negative ad.

Survey research shows clearly that most people get most of their information about politics from television. Political professionals distinguish between news — "free media" in their nomenclature and — "paid media."

Given adequate money, the pros by and large prefer paid media as the medium of choice by which to communicate with the electorate, if only because they thereby avoid having to deal with nosy and mostly uncontrollable reporters. This is especially so when they decide to "go negative," a tactic that usually requires the unchallenging environment of TV time, bought and paid for.

Moreover, the pros have discovered that the easiest way to get around the legal limitations on campaign spending is to collaborate with so-called "independent" committees — wink, wink; nod, nod — that have "no links" to the campaign. Independence makes them immune from reporting and disclosure requirements, while the lack of linkage provides the candidate with useful deniability when an outrageous lapse of taste or honesty takes place.

In parceling out blame for this downward spiral, the news media bear an important and largely overlooked share.

Most television stations, which charge premium rates for political ads, are reluctant to bite the hand that feeds them by subjecting these same ads to the fierce scrutiny of their newscasts before they are run. Some newspapers try to analyze the content and evaluate the distortions



PHILIP POWER

Given our tight local focus... we do cover — and have a clear responsibility to cover, with aggressive integrity — congressional, state legislative (and) local races.

tions of TV advertising, but the stories usually run too late to immunize public understanding.

Given our tight local focus at this newspaper, we can't do much about presidential or senatorial elections. But we do cover — and have a clear responsibility to cover, with aggressive integrity — congressional and state legislative races, as well as various local contests. For the record, here's our policy with respect to political advertising:

• We will not accept political ads for our newspaper that we know are untrue. Where we are suspicious, we will check with our newsroom before running the ad.

• We will not accept for publication in the last edition before the election an ad that makes a new charge without contacting the opponent to offer an opportunity to rebut.

• We will review — for accuracy, taste and relevance — television ads run by candidates in our circulation area. In particular, we will assume that ads run by "independent" committees are controlled by the candidate unless offered compelling proof this is not so.

• Our endorsements will be based in part on whether candidates contribute to a rational discussion of the issues and a civil tone to the campaign.

Phil Power is chairman of the company that owns this newspaper. His touch-tone voice mail number is (313) 953-2047, Ext. 1880.

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