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Paivi Kyllonen-Kunnas

Politics to improve people’s lives - sharing contemporary art

1 What makes artwork a target for public policy discussions? Evaluation of the Percent-for-Art principle in the construction of public facilities and renovation projects has been positive, in the media and among the public. Public interest seems to have a positive effect on taking care of artworks and their values. What do you see when you look at a public artwork? Standards in conservation theory and discussion amongst conservators varies, depending on the materials used to produce the artwork - from contemporary materials to more traditional techniques. This article discusses the Percent-for-Art principle and the related associated policies and philosophical issues regarding public art collections in the city of Oulu (Uleåborg), in Finland.

2 Our recent developments in collection care, which include the Percent-for-Art principle, have improved the system for acquiring public art, and for taking care of it by monitoring the care and conservation of the artworks. Ethical interpretations in the perception of objects and sites have increased the follow-up knowledge that exists about the situation and condition of the artwork. This knowledge is especially relevant as choices have to be made when artworks are targeted for conservation and restoration.

3 The vision for the public art Percent-Art-Principle programme is summed up in a nutshell in the words of art historian T. Kekäläinen: “The everyday living environment including urban planning and design, plays a significant role in individual development and
wellbeing, as well as strengthening the feeling of community.” In Oulu there are about 141,000 people and the city area is typically representative of Nordic technology and the electronics industry. The age distribution of the population in the area makes it culturally interesting. In Oulu the average age is remarkably young; in the year 2011 the average age was 37.1 years old. A considerable number of Percent-for-Art artworks have been acquired for schools, day and health-care centres and the city’s other service facilities such as homes for the elderly.

To raise awareness of life-cycle thinking for public art, and for people to relive art, including its interdisciplinary aspects, we must not forget to encourage aspects of humanism and humanity in society. As philosopher M. Nussbaum has pointed out: during times of economic fluctuation and competition, important skills related to art and humanism, which are healthy and democratic may be lost. Researcher K. Seutu renews the idea of the subordination of particular types of knowledge in society: culture and humanistic researchers and artists are subordinate in our contemporary capitalistic but democratic society. She postulates that language, literature, culture, art and innovative research are invisible economic factors, which uphold human viewpoints and teach us not just to maintain harsh productivity, accomplishment and competition, but to also create understanding and humanity.

History of the Percent-for-Art principle

Starting in the year 2000, there has been a great deal of interest in the acquisition of artworks by the Percent-for-Art principle in Oulu, as well as in other cities in Finland. As part of public policy in Oulu, the Percent-for-Art principle emphasises city strategy in line with individuality, creativity, courage and tolerance. As Cultural Management Director Mr. Risto Vuoria from the City Cultural Office states, the principle has been successful now for over 10 years for facilitating investments and renovations. “In the city of Oulu we have built up a state leading process implementing the Percent-for-Art principle.”

This visionary review process has its predecessors in a number of international models: In North America, we talk about various public art programmes, and in Great Britain, one discusses public art strategy. In Finland, this principle refers to municipal or state public art. Elsewhere, for example, in other Nordic countries and in Britain, it is synonymous with public and private foundations and spaces, as well as social public art projects and private business initiatives. Germany has a well-recognised conceptual system of “Kunst am Bau”. In Finland, purchase projects are multi-structural and range from single artworks to larger public space art projects (Ruoholahti, Helsinki) or complete area construction projects such as in Arabianranta in Helsinki. In Arabianranta, the wasteland by the seafront was transformed to capture its significant connections to arts and crafts, design and music as well as the already partially finished built environment in the area. Other cities in addition to Oulu and Helsinki, which have famous permanent Percent-for-Art principle acquisition programmes in Finland include Tampere, Turku and Salo.

The history of the Percent-for-Art principle in Finland goes back to the start of the last century, with plans being made to introduce it as early as the 1920s. The wars from 1939 to 1944 and the time for reconstruction during the 1950s, however, prevented it being carried out in practice.
The idea of percent-for art in Oulu dates back to 1964. Particularly remarkable in Oulu is that the Percent-for-Art principle and its funding includes both care and conservation of artworks situated in city facilities, plots, yards and street areas. This idea of combining care and conservation with the purchase of art originates from permanent plans for art acquisition, care and conservation, which were accepted for use by the Town Board in 2001, and subsequently announced in the City Council. The Art Acquisition, Care and Conservation Working Group, a group of specialists that have now been working for twelve years, have become a permanent group in the city organisation.

### Acquisition of artworks for city facilities

The Percent-for-Art principle has been more regularly followed in city of Oulu purchases from 2001, with the percentage being estimated at 1-1.5% per facility investment. The final resolution of a visual-art acquisition and its scale is to be made by the City Council when it decides yearly on building investments and construction planning for particular city areas in line with its acquisition plan. Decision processes and policies for Percent-for-Art principle acquisitions differ in every city.

According to the latest agreement from year 2008 on art investments for the city, Oulu City Art Museum has been directed funds previously administered by the Oulu Facilities Centre. This gives the museum representative authority in contracts and allows it to pursue quality artwork acquisitions. In acquisitions, the main project management and funding is run today by the City Art Museum, and secondarily from Oulu Facilities Centre, which is part of Oulu Technical Centre and cooperates with Oulu Technical Public Utilities and other construction companies in the construction of city buildings. The Technical Centre is responsible for working in close cooperation with the City Art Museum on the acquisition of visual art as laid down in the Percent-for-art rule.

Artwork acquisition planning and implementation starts even before the artist’s drafts are ready. A two-stage model for the acquisition contract provides mutual confidence in approval of the draft, and after that, the final ordering and manufacture of the artwork. Acquisition of artwork for the city of Oulu art collections is linked from start to finish to aspects of conservation theory. References to this process are readily available in the Technical Follow-up Reports in the conservation archives. In Oulu, the City Council defined a new separate investment initiative in 2004.

The city owns several art collections. The Percent-for-art principle increases the number of art objects in the city’s custody resulting in art works which need to be taken care of and monitored, and which need to be maintained and require long-term conservation treatments. As the Town Board and City Council have accepted the city’s architectural programme strategy (1998), which controls the maintenance of municipally owned facilities, Oulu City Art Museum has built up a management strategy for its art collection. It controls the ethical principles along with the accumulation of the collection, deposits and loans, conservation, restoration and artwork removal from the collection.
Care and Conservation and the restoration of public art

The city of Oulu runs systems for the care, conservation and restoration of the public artworks. The system of preventive care for public artworks started from the year 2000, a year earlier than the Percent-for-Art acquisition programme. The preventive care programme is run by an art conservator who collates artworks from the city collection for the maintenance programme. Final responsibilities and decision on larger treatments are confirmed by the city art museum’s director.

In larger projects, conservation treatments are organised through collaboration between the art museum director, a collection researcher and an art conservator. The acquisition of artworks on a general level and the preventive and active treatments for the care of the artworks are presented to the Public Art Acquisition, Care and Conservation Working Group. The working group consists of representatives from Oulu Cultural Services (art museum director as chairperson, art researcher and art conservator from art collections, and the cultural history museum director) and Oulu Technical Centre (city architect, city gardener, landscape architect, planning architect). The secretary of the working group is a separate person (the museum secretary). The group meets two to four times a year.
From acquisition to care responsibilities

The conservation department has a long-term plan for all public art and for yearly care and maintenance budgeting. A Conservation Follow-up Report is prepared on all conservation and care activities carried out. For reporting all information for conservation documentation, the conservator uses the artist’s material reports, information from the design and construction, as well as technical documentation and planning data. Entries pertaining to the time and reason for separate treatments are also documented in the Museum Collection Data System “MUUSA”. There is also a separate catalogue of most treatment-worthy artworks, which has been updated five separate times since 2001, and a catalogue of the museum’s own operational documentation. The same kind of catalogue has been made for Percent-for-Art principle artworks. In practice, annual follow-up treatments consist of care, maintenance and year-on conservation treatments. This also includes treatments for damages from unexpected security and visibility threats in-situ. Yearly work includes annual treatments and cleaning checks, equipment maintenance and service procurements. The procedures result in salary, equipment and car expenses.

To ease the care of the Percent-for-Art principle artworks there has been an agreement since 2008 between the Oulu Facilities Centre and the City Art Museum. The agreement specifies that conservation related tasks for the artwork and particular user directed responsibilities will be agreed on and written in a report after the purchase of the artwork. This Customer Report is provided by the art conservator in charge at the art museum. Information in the report includes a description of the artwork, its location, the supposed preventive care treatments on a case-by-case basis and contact details. The report is made available to property managers and real estate managers through the Facilities Automation System “Haahtela RES”. The agreement contains a request to provide information to the city art museum conservator regarding any misuse or damages, as well as renovations in spaces and yards.

With the Percent-for-Art principle artworks the care and documentation starts as soon as the first records and drafts for the artwork are delivered to the conservation department. The period for the purchase is rather long, taking from one to several years. During the purchase of the artwork, the art conservator will receive information about risks or technical material requirements if the situation so requires. It is good to scope out the chain of preservation and conservation measures, as well as restoration treatments for the artwork’s history and the future.
The sculpture "Mirage"(2003) was cleaned after several years after its creation to save paint from deterioration.

Photo Paivi Kylionen-Kunnas©. Oulu City Art Collections.

This should include an independent combination of treatments for the expected life-cycle of the artwork.
Fig. 3 Veikko Törmänen’s painted reinforced concrete installation “Cross-Ruled Notebook” (2002)

Some parts of the artwork had to be repainted in 2005.
Photo Paivi Kyllonen-Kunnas©. Oulu City Art Collections.

The finished public artwork also has to be correctly checked on-site, where it is located permanently, before writing the Conservation Follow-up and Customer Reports.

Preventive conservation and care of public art collections may include a variety of efforts to monitor their particular circumstances. These factors may have already been taken care of by the artist in the use of materials, support materials or framing solutions. The illumination or surroundings/space should not be changed or interfered with as far as possible (for example by having signs or devices put too close to the object). Up to now, there have been surprisingly many status changes in the vicinities or surroundings of many artworks, such as renovations or displacements of the public artwork.
Matti Koskela's light and steel installation had to be removed for the renovation of the facilities of Oulu City Theater in 2005. It was returned in its location later.

Photo Paivi Kyllonen-Kunnas®. Oulu City Art Collections.

It is important to monitor treatments so that they form processes with the aim of furthering the object’s care and preventive conservation management. With a permanent in-house art conservator these technical and practical care issues are ensured as needs for them arise. It is important to ensure a smooth approach for conservation, first of all by adhering to the planned budget, while not forgetting the quality of the care. For example, the materials, techniques and product brands are listed in the report, and thus allows personnel connected with the care of the artwork to be selective and organised. This means that discussions and contacts with facility maintenance personnel have slightly increased. Taking care of media art and installations with electronic equipment or electronic controlling devices is different from conserving artwork created with traditional materials. In these cases things such as functionality checks and regular overhauls become very important services.

Philosophy in practical conservation

In conservation, the technical documentation involves professionally principled interpretation. What could raise more expectations in this profession than having the right perception of the artwork? The active preventive care of art collections varies, but the basics of conservation concern material culture – real objects. In contemporary art conservation, the respect for the artist’s intent and the integrity of the work may impose the need for a certain shift in perception, from the importance of the
material of an art work, towards an emphasis on the artist’s meaning in context. Contextual meaning of objects is often provided as non-tangible information, which improves sympathetic understanding, and opens the uniqueness of the object as an artwork. To preserve both the material nature and the conceptual nature of the art works, for example with installations, many things may become subject to speculation. If these aspects not well understood, there is a real chance of making poor and arrogant decisions regarding treatments. Without considering the original intent works can be completely misunderstood.

The interest in the value and care of public artworks has increased among professionals and the public. What, therefore, are the opportunities for managing the monitoring of an artwork and its inherent aesthetic controversies and the artwork’s originality during its preventive care? What about for treatments? While interpreting the artwork, you must be able to consider whether it indicates anything (to you), and whether it contains aspects, which are open to interpretation? Methodological strategies can aid the interpretation and contextualisation of the artwork and help to approach a new understanding that adds (something to) our singular original knowledge of the artwork.

The professional documentation for preventive and active conservation creates an understanding of values and ethics and other technical areas, which may not be predicted beforehand because new significances may be discovered in the artwork. It is an integral part of conservation to promote the follow-up decisions for the care of the object. So, whatever is considered as art today, may turn out to be considered temporary according to the lifespan agreement between the artist and art museum.

Fig. 5 Jaakko Pernu, “Glass of Water”, 2012

Jaakko Pernu's painted willow tree installation “Glass of Water”, 2012 was build in its place in the park in May over the course of four weeks by the artist.
Photo Paivi Kyllonen-Kunnas©. Private collection.

It is revealing that materials for contemporary artworks include more fragmentary techniques, among other traditional materials. Because of this, new insights and novel
methods may stretch ethical points of view and may differ from so-called permanent public artworks conservation. The extended idea of the artwork can become surprisingly clear when the significances of the installation or public artwork are broadened to include the surrounding areas, as they in some cases should be.

26 We apply standards consciously, or unconsciously, when we look at art. Especially in contemporary art, the artist is a primary source of information regarding the artwork within the context of the artist’s practice and artistic conceptions. If necessary, it is important to engage in free discussion with the artist. The conservator may use a variety of strategies and follow numerous theoretical considerations. The conceptual system for a conservator’s documentation of an artwork is also subject to variation. This may first of all depend on the professional qualifications of the conservator and also on experience. Decision-making structures and active chains of reasoning have been recognised in contemporary art conservation as being central to preventive and planned work. The latest and most respectful E.C.C.O. document profiles the profession through existing definitions stating that conservation-restoration can be firmly identified as an integrated part of the management of the cultural heritage. The need for research and documentation at every stage of the decision-making process is one of the guiding principles for professional conservation-restoration and which gives it academic status. It also mentions that it is a question of skills, several kinds of skills.

27 Project management values, decisions and chosen intents are crucial aspects of the work.

28 The care of art collections consists of a set of evaluative decisions with unique values contributing towards the evaluation of the significances in the artwork, planning active processes and taking care of human and financial resources.

29 Long-established practices and procedures may contain decisions made for the sake of the artwork’s threat to itself, more often than any threat from human activity. When there is an obvious threat, such as a sculpture falling down from a pillar, the decisions for renovation and conservation are easy to make. If the artwork’s material shows weaknesses, which are likely to be destructive to the work itself, there should be a clear decision made for treatments in the long run, within a clear time cycle. While decisions regarding clear threats are obviously necessary to make, decisions on material weaknesses and collection care need to be validated more carefully with the public.

30 Using the Percent-for-Art principle in the care of artworks has advantages resulting from the process and from the chosen group of specialists involved in it. Using dialogue as a tool can be highly effective in acting in the best interest of an artwork collection. Pilette and Harris raise this issue and recommend having regular meetings and writing minutes. To this end it is equally important that the conservator has researched tasks and courses of action before engaging in decision making meetings. It may be difficult to understand the long-term courses of action in conservation treatments as well as the often very necessary research required before a treatment’s approval. As Pilette and Harris point out, the acceptance of the limitations of the physical treatments and the occasional needs for additional increases in work volume for the treatments may be challenging to validate among different professionals. As each party becomes more aware of the other’s needs, the treatment becomes less time consuming and more useful. Regarding technical details such as materials and their uses, it is quite often necessary to discuss the details with the artist or with different specialists.
Public art and policy in society

The culture surrounding treatments, acquisition and care of public art in the city of Oulu has been established through democratic policies and the written and signed documents from the Town Board and City Council dating back to 2001 and 2004. Combining specialist areas of know-how in art conservation and restoration, and in our ethical decisions, we cherish the artwork's originality. If politics is understood in the Aristotelian sense as serving to take care of common tasks and goals for society, then art assumes its political role by taking part in building our society.26

Oulu City Art Museum opened to the public in 1963 and the Percent-for-Art principle was adopted by the city 1964. In the 1970s and 1980s, different competitions were held for public art acquisitions. Unfortunately, in the 1990s during the years of economic recession, the Percent-for-Art principle was almost totally forgotten.27

Political activity leads occasionally to a serious assessment of our values. Noted at least by artists at the time, an initiative was made by two politicians in the City Council in 1999. The Percent-for-Art principle was raised for discussion among city officers and other council representatives. It was noted in the debate that one of the goals of the strategy for the city of Oulu was to develop a good physical, social and mental environment for the people who live there, as well as to provide job opportunities for artists.28

Media contacts have played an important role in this area, involving art education, information and reporting to the media by the public works officer, museum director, researchers and art conservators. This informative policy provides validation for the artwork and sometimes opens up the process of making artwork to residents and users of the facilities in the area. This can involve interest groups in the same idea, creating a circle around the artwork, its potential and its significance. In Oulu, the city web site has made it easy for citizens to read about the original ideas behind the art and the artists’ stories associated with them. Every new public art acquisition also has its own designated media time in the press, too.
We are conservative in our choices in democracy, and this is normal, isn’t it? If public policy contains public art collections, then that policy can also be said to value equal rights for the citizens. From the 1960s onwards, the cultural policy of Finnish society has been founded on the western concept of democracy. In this policy, art and cultural services should be accessible to all citizens regardless of where they live or their social status, which guarantees art experiences for the population. Acquisition is a positive action in the eyes of the general public. This means providing information about the artwork after the investment in it, e.g. for web site.

Everyday experience shows that value expectations towards public policy for the acquisition, care and conservation of artworks are high. People notice that there is an artwork in their vicinity and can establish new connections to the art and the sites where the art is when someone comes to do the conservation work: by making conservation local people rediscover the art. People value the specialised work involved in the acquisition of an artwork and its documentation. They value preventive conservation and the documentation on the line of treatments and variation in an art work’s lifetime. They also value qualified decision-making in care and conservation. The idea of conservation expertise in its preventive and active conservation forms is well respected if it is made available, in other words, if it is used in cultural heritage projects.

Good ethical discussions and decisions will lead to more solid ethical and technical solutions. The best co-operation is achieved when there is agreement on the modus operandi. The funding needs to be made through a process of discussion with a variety of professionals and decision makers. Without funding there will be no treatment decisions, because there will be no people such as conservators to make those decisions and the thoughtful specialised follow-up for preventive conservation, which will be necessary.
How can we succeed with humanistic intentions and agreed values? First, we have to assume that art is a democratic value. O’Brien quotes Nussbaum (2010), saying that art and humanities are being downsized, and continues that there is a serious erosion of the very qualities essential to democracy itself. Furthermore, Nussbaum comments on economic growth, saying that it involves “the favour of the cultivation of the technical”, and seems to prioritize personal or national economic advancement over the humanistic.

For heritage preservation, the ethical and moral (critical) concept of decisions and recommendations made by conservators instil the decisions with a certain ethical and moral guarantee because of their professional qualifications (for example ICOM International Council of Museums membership). Conservation theory is, on the one hand, unambiguous, where the importance is to maintain the physical, historic and conceptual integrity of the objects. On the other hand, dilemmas of integrity seem to have increased with contemporary artistic developments.

Conclusion

As with many strategies of cognitive action, our interpretation in conservation policy and practice must be able to detect, perceive and capture the originalities of the artwork. Without standardised professionally valid perception there is no valued observation, and no recognition of conscious knowledge. All actions indicate the existence of some form of postulate thinking, even when we do not pay attention to the matter cognitively. Not to draw any final conclusions on contemporary art conservation as such, it would be possible to conclude that O. Naukkarinen’s idea on mixing is relevant in this context, and that contemporary art conservation is indeed mixing itself with contemporary art. In other words, it could be described – in some sense – as a form of mingling in the artification process, where the conservation adopts some feature, such as art(istic) values or treatments and non-tangible forms in the interpretation of the artwork.

The relationship between an artwork and argumentative kinds of thinking, such as philosophy and aesthetics (with its broad concepts of looking at artwork), interests contemporary art conservators. This article has glanced at the practical conservation processes of artwork with its aesthetic meanings, the artist’s own impressions as well as art historical and culturally historical significances.

In the city of Oulu, the systematic follow-up of the Percent-for-Art principle has led to mutual acts of volition and to the reform of various traditions. Using processes like the percent-for art principle in projects for the construction of public facilities is highly dependent on the developer. The design, preparation and planning of the target is always a conscious effort aiming towards a material product, in this case an artwork. Permanent funding leads to an expression of local values.

Under City Council decisions, by following the Percent-for-Art principle, artwork is designed for its public space and reflects the visions of the city. The situation has also improved business know-how among the artists. Speculation turns into serious responsibility, when the evaluation of the decision making process has a standardised form of official approval.

We cannot force tradition, but tradition can be changed with time. Appropriately made choices, meaning preventive care, conservation and restoration of the artwork, lead to remarkable outstanding outcomes if properly upheld and implemented. It saves money
to make the correct permanent or one time choices, not wasting time by taking unnecessary action.

44 The integration of the local municipalities of Haukipudas, Kiiminki, Oulu, Oulunsalo and Yli-Ii planned for the beginning of 2013 will transform the area into the fifth largest city in Finland with a population of 185 000 inhabitants. The number of artworks will also expand by a fifth compared to the current situation. It is essential to provide an evidence-based operational definition for Percent-for-Art acquisitions and specialised care of artworks.

45 We are constantly able to be amazed by the artist’s rich ideas and working processes in contemporary public artworks. In professionally run art collections, artwork can now be documented in databases, and it can automatically be part of a care and conservation programme. Museum law, city and museum strategies and laws that safeguard artists’ copyright and professional care for the artworks are all possible, despite the controversial tasks different circumstances may create. We have proceeded from manual and mechanical points of views towards creative humanistic standards. In our view, culture, artworks, as well as ethical and other values in art objects must be cared for despite the overwhelming economic and engineering data supremacy. Diversity in the ethical views for our chosen path will multiply our newly found values, if we make the right choices.

NOTES

1. KEKÄLÄINEN, T., « Kuvataide rakennetussa ympäristössä », Kuvanveisto ajassa ja tilassa, Helsinki, 2010, No 1267, p. 47. Kekäläinen is a member of the Art Acquisition, Care and Conservation Working Group, working as an art history researcher.
7. The art acquisition was organized through cooperation between a private art-coordinator, a private construction company and the City of Helsinki. ibid.

11. Separate management and funding, for example, for technical constructions, real estate and land areas authorisation as well as building services needed for the execution of the art projects are run on behalf of Oulu Technical Public Utility.


14. The Percent-for-Art acquisition projects are coordinated by separate working groups where the project leader is construction architect or engineer from Oulu Technical Public Utility, for that particular facility investment.


25. ibid.


RÉSUMÉS


The practical co-operation when applying the Percent-for-Art principle creates a visionary, socio-economic prospect for a new operational environment for public art acquisition and care. This article participates in the debate from the humanities point of view in society. Interpretation of an artwork involves new insights as new originalities challenge art conservators. The task of monitoring the care of a public artwork with its aesthetic and ethical controversies is debated.

INDEX

Keywords : public art, Percent-for-Art principle, care, conservation-restoration, preservation, theory, project management

Mots-clés : art public, "pourcentage pour l’art", entretien, conservation, restauration, théorie, gestion de projet
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