

# Transformation

by  
Denise R. Duarte

As artists, it can be our role to define and manifest our best ideals of our time. However, we are of our time and are deeply formed by our own social conditioning, even if we are in the process of dismantling these constructs. We serve and to some degree, are controlled by, this same society when we work in the public realm. These projects are usually funded with public money and with that there are expectations that we are contracted to fulfill. There are governing bodies that approve or reject our designs. Sometimes we can be bold in our artistic and social justice expressions, sometimes we have to be more subversive.

History is filled with empty or broken plinths that once elevated a depiction of a heroic person that represented a community's values and ideals. Before conquerors wrote the history books from their perspective, they first toppled the monuments of the people they defeated, such as when Nazi Germany ordered the dismantling of the bust of Austrian Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss in 1938 during the annexation of Austria. It sent a strong message of a change in values, ideals and government.

The people have also risen up and destroyed public cultural symbols when they no longer represented their values such as the sculpture of Russian Tsar Alexander III in 1917 during the Russian revolution to the destruction of the Lenin statue by sculptor Sergey Merkurov in the Ukraine in 2013. In Afghanistan, the Taliban demolished the giant Buddha in 2001 because they believed depicting the human form was in opposition with Islamic Law.

In our contemporary times, we are re-evaluating and removing some of this country's monuments as we reflect and redefine what represents who we are and what we value. Our country is experiencing significant social stresses with one group clinging to a traditional definition of U.S. history that includes Confederate memorials from an unsuccessful Civil War versus an inclusive movement that refuses to accept statues to people that represent a racist history.

But art's role in our society is evolving. Public Art is no longer just a memorial to a person, it can be more, such as a component of Creative Placemaking, a community-led process and at its best, results in strengthened communities and enhanced lives. It is no longer limited to artwork viewed in the realm of an isolated piece: a mural, a sculpture or a merely decorative functional element. Rather, these temporary or permanent artistic contributions add to a community's agency to create their formal and informal environments in such a way to benefit the living.

**“Creative placemaking** is when artists, arts organizations, and community development practitioners deliberately integrate arts and culture into community revitalization work - placing

arts at the table with land-use, transportation, economic development, education, housing, infrastructure, and public safety strategies.”

National Endowment for the Arts

Where does an artist begin to enter the realm of a community development practitioner? My trajectory path from artist to cultural change worker was not linear.

I had strong social and environmental passions even when I was young. Once I discovered that the world I thought existed was a fantasy, created for me by the dominant culture, I desired change. I was an activist before I ever considered myself an artist. The initial issue that I invested time and energy on was to stop the Canadian government’s sponsored killing of baby harp seals for their fur. My activism expanded to decades of work in feminist, LBGTQ, other social justice and environmental issues.

I began my art practice as a maker, which competed with my activism. As my comprehension of social structures and injustices grew, my art evolved to become a tool for change and adapted to be inclusive of a diversified art practice that includes a studio practice, a public art practice, a social practice, a civic practice and graphic design. I see the function of art differently now. I envision art that can be a necessary and relevant social action. Now, I move in a fluid manner from activist to artist and back again without regard to that transition. It is all simply my art practice.

“Ancestral Gateway” was born of activism, not my activism, but that of Alice Wilson, who was a committed advocate for public art for West Las Vegas. When I was asked to participate as part of an artist team to create a public artwork memorializing West Las Vegas, I initially declined because I felt that I did not reflect that community. I was eventually persuaded that I could contribute in a meaningful way in redefining what a memorial could be. Each artist in the team brought something unique that benefited the project.

“The goal of the Gateway Project is to provide a sculptural art element that reflects the culture of the community and stands as a beacon of the neighborhood’s strength and resilience. This sculpture seeks to increase the community’s sense of identity and pride, while providing an educational opportunity to share historic symbolism. This project has grown out of community participation and reflects and celebrates the lives that make up the West Las Vegas community.”

Excerpt from the original artist statement written by the artist team: Dayo Adelaja, Sylvester Collier, Denise R. Duarte and Adolfo R. Gonzales and administered by then City of Las Vegas Arts Commissioner Vicki Richardson.

“Ancestral Gateway” was a memorial of its time. And even though we spent significant energy and time developing the concept and design, we had to navigate questions about who we were and our role in determining this public symbol. We were a diverse group of artists with a strong commitment to racial equity and social justice. Since the project was not fully funded initially,

we had the time to reflect and develop a strong design that celebrated those who had come before, while allowing space for the West Las Vegas community to evolve. Dayo Adelaja, a member of the artist team, recalled that his goal was that the community would “recognize the symbols and then recognize themselves...because in time people may forget.”



*Ancestral Gateway*, Photo credit: David Lancaster

I went on to create the sculpture “Reach” with the same artists, including Vicki Richardson, as well as several public artworks on my own. I learned that it is challenging to navigate all the social ramifications of public art and the process itself is simultaneously fulfilling and limiting.

I discovered that my social practice provided more flexibility and freedom to create artwork. I often partnered with a community group, whose mission was aligned with my intentions. These projects have provided some of the most meaning and fulfillment to me as an artist.

Three selected projects I have facilitated:

- “The Human Tapestry of Sexual and Gender Identity” weaves a community’s varied sexual and gender identities together into a fabric of that society, exposing the beauty of humanity’s diversity and highlighting people’s connections to one another
- “Nevada Women’s Legacy Community Quilt” premiered at the Nevada Legislature Senate Atrium and traveled the state, produced by Women of Diversity Productions, Inc. - highlighting the influence and impact of women on the lives of Nevadans
- “Women’s Biography Bookshelves”, premiered at the Nevada State Library, Archives and Public Records and traveled the state, produced by Women of Diversity Productions, Inc., a component of the Nevada Women’s Legacy Project for the Nevada Sesquicentennial - highlighting that Nevada women have accomplishments worthy of biographies

I have been able to expand my practice into creative placemaking projects. These projects, often not as visible or tangible as public art, have had more long-lasting impact on the participating community members in different ways. One facilitator changed his teaching career trajectory because the community experience was so fulfilling. He saw this profession's potential differently. Another project, the community solved a vandalism spree by teaching neighborhood youth art skills that resulted in their art being permanently exhibited in a community center, giving the youth the experience of community appreciation.

The value of art's impact can be realized by altering people's lives in positive and fulfilling ways and introducing the concept that art could be more than just decoration. Art's role can be an essential element in community development and sustainability by means of not only the obvious cultural expression, but by providing jobs, opportunities, methodologies and dialogue. Art brings community together. It highlights issues and solves problems. It is not the answer, but it can be part of the answer.

**"The only constant in life is change."**

**Heraclitus**

Denise R. Duarte is a multidisciplinary, socially-engaged artist and activist.

Duarte received her Master of Fine Arts in Community Arts from Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) where she received the Jacob and Hilda Blaustein Foundation Scholarship and Fellowship and earned the College Teaching of Art Certificate.

She has received two Las Vegas Mayor's Urban Design Awards for Public Art. The first award was in 2008 as a design team member for *Ancestral Gateway* and in 2011 for *Flourish*, as part of the Cultural Corridor.

She has completed nine public artworks and has facilitated numerous socially-engaged art projects.

She was accepted to the Nevada Arts Council's Artist in Schools +Communities Roster, Education and Community Tracks and was listed as an artist to watch on Creative Capital's *On Our Radar* in 2015.

Denise's lifelong passions include art, activism and the exploration of the social fabric of life.