continuation of imperialism through food distribution, Benner's gardens offer a corrective to the misinformation and hype propagated by the food industry. For instance, Joe Cummins' case study in this volume, responding to the artists' *Trans/mission: Papaya Vectors* (1998), usefully details the real costs and escalating consequences of introducing genetically-modified papaya. While the fruit may be more resistant to virus, genetic modification also nullifies its medicinal properties (making the population more susceptible to intestinal parasites), contaminates surrounding, non-GM papaya trees (subjecting farmers to lawsuits and economic sanctions), and threatens the long-term viability of the ecosystem (increasing the presence of antibiotic-resistant bacteria and fungi). Critiques such as this are a forte of Benner's works, yet there is an affirmative dimension that is equally significant, as Matthew Teitelbaum notes (35). Parallel to the admonishment the artworks render against multinationals, there exists an acknowledgment of indigenous peoples' contribution to the world's nutritional well-being, as well as a championing for their right to share in the economic benefits that thousands of years of farming has produced. *Gardens of a Colonial Present* elucidates the full complexity of Benner's practice and, in particular, its notable balance between generosity and criticality.

Jim Drobnick

Public Art: The Kitsch and the Subtle

Cher Krause Knight. *Public Art: Theory, Practice and Populism*.
Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008, 208 pp.

Public Art in Canada: Critical Perspectives, edited by Annie Gérin and James S. McLean.
Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009, 336 pp.

ASSESSING PUBLIC art is a laborious task, inasmuch as it presupposes working definitions of "public" and "art" in an era witnessing the erosion of public communicability and responsibility, on the one hand, and the explosion of hyper-mediated art and design cultures, on the other. It is thus that Cher Krause Knight, in *Public Art: Theory, Practice and Populism*, proffers several, at times conflicting, definitions of public art, as that which is physically and intellectually accessible, immersive and experiential, controversial, and/or simply "fun." Knight admonishes governments for taking a path of least resistance in commissioning assuredly non-offensive, "bland" works of art, suggesting that they should instead "welcome discord," which, in the words of Erika Doss, is both "healthy and hopeful" (20). But if this seems to invite a controversy-courting definition of public art, her final, prescriptive example is Chicago's touristy *Cloud Gate*: "People take pictures, laugh at their distorted reflections, 'enter' under its 12-foot arch and lie on the ground to marvel at the view…" (154). On the whole, Knight's response to the problems inherent to (the definition of) public art tends towards the celebration of whatever is enjoyed by diverse audiences.

While it would be easy to dismiss this as a too easy populism, it seems no less problematic to merely reverse one's priorities in celebrating works that self-reflexively politicize themselves and the spaces each inhabits, as, for instance, did Richard Serra's infamous and oft-discussed *Tilted Arc* (1981). An interventionist work like this might garner a lot of press and fierce debate, but not all communication is commendable—particularly when it polarizes and leaves interlocutors at

each other's proverbial necks, suffocating or foreclosing the space and time in which more productive dialogue might emerge. In his contribution to *Public Art in Canada: Critical Perspectives*, Bruce Barber employs Jürgen Habermas' theory of communicative action to chart the effectivity of different forms of public art, suggesting that it is at its best when it is open to everyone and where some form of discussion/debate is openly encouraged "that may or may not result in a resolution or construction and promotion of new ideas for further articulation and action" (175). Sometimes, that which begins in this vein can be diverted into the more problematic, polarizing form of intervention, as happened with the Halifax Begs Your Pardon! tactical media event of 2002; designed as "friendly interventions" that might elicit reflections on the "geopsychological" landscape of Halifax, the inclusion of a few LCD screens with political messages, left in various parts of the city, ignited a hyperbolic, mass-mediated fear of terrorism that "precipitated the vicious cycle of provocation-expression" we have come to know only too well, post-9/11. Barber concludes: "In these times, cultural intervention requires… an attention to the political dynamics of action and protest that would minimize the risk of reproducing the very power structures that are being undermined" (178). So where, then, might we find an art that is neither as facile as Cloud Gate nor as politicized/politicizable as Halifax…? Where is this subtle and seductive art?

Barber provides one (non-Canadian) example (WochenKlausur), and the other contributors to *Public Art in Canada* provide further clues. Jumping off from Erin Manning's observation that Canadian cultural politics revolves around the superimposition of identity onto questions of national territory, Annie Gérin introduces the volume in suggesting that "if public art can be seen as an attempt to petrify accepted notions of collective identity in a given place…it also becomes a site where the homogeneity or legitimacy of these representations is constantly challenged and reframed" (8). In a sense, the contemporary crux of public art—the problem of definition(s)—has always been a problem in Canada, for what Canadians "share," historically, is a lack of shared history, public, or sense of art's function. If for France or England a monument celebrating victory over some foreign power was—and to some extent still is—both self-evident and effective in its space and time-binding function, in Canada few such monuments have gone uncontested or, as Gérin points out in her exposé of a beheaded Montreal bust of King George III, unmolested (3). In his poignant contribution, Jeff Thomas, a photographer and member of the Six Nations Reserve, muses over the fate of 'the Indian' at the base of the Samuel de Champlain monument in the nation's capital, originally placed in a subordinate, kneeling position:

> Was he intended to appear subservient to Champlain? Was he Champlain's scout? I looked around the monument for a plaque that would tell me who this Indian was. But there was nothing to read, just the familiar silence I have come across so many times before (116).

Thomas recounts how the Indian was removed from this spot in response to a protest by the Assembly of First Nations, who argued that "the Indian man misrepresented the contributions Aboriginal people have made to the development of Canada." Thomas suggests that "he should have stayed in place because the monument did in fact symbolize how Canada sees Aboriginal people"; "[b]ut," he sardonically continues, "in hindsight the removal and relocation of the Indian was a perfect example of how Aboriginals were moved from their homeland"(120) (my emphasis). To dispel the controversy, the Indian was moved, in 1999, across the street; his "familiar silence"

moved with him as no plaque exists to bear witness to his controversial history. In contrast to a government deathly afraid of controversy (and, in this case, of effectively memorializing it) and an organization unable to appreciate subtleties of history and remembrance, Thomas' work reflexively and carefully expresses the manifold tensions that cut through Canada in space and time. Such work exemplifies how, in the dispersed and ob-scene era we ex-habit, "public art" can be both public—addressing some form of collectivity that shares common concerns—and art—expressing/realizing cultural and socio-political tensions. Whereas *Tilted Arc* only relates to its environment through an antagonistic secondary discourse, and *Cloud Gate*, which could be justifiably labeled as a gelatinous hunk of kitsch,[1] disavows the conditions of its place and production, Thomas' work—if not the now disjointed monuments themselves—remains 'rooted' in "Canadian history," attempting, in essence, to articulate the antagonisms of this history. Thus, its reflexivity is not "put on"; it emerges from a profound and, in this sense, genuine consideration of the histories at hand.[2]

Concluding *Public Art in Canada*, James S. McLean notes how new meanings accrue, over time, to any given artistic work: "A valuable central concern with works of public art... lies in their ability to indicate the extent of changes to the social formation" (306). At their best, they also index the lack which cuts through the core of the social (de)formation(s), which is what seems at stake not only in Barber's, Gérin's, and Thomas' contributions, but also in Joan Coutu's analysis of how public art in the late 19th and early 20th centuries vainly attempted to demonstrate Canadian domination over nature, Anna Maria Carlevaris' analysis of how different parties came to see their own struggles and desires reflected in the Montreal monument to John Cabot, and C.S. Ogden's charting of the "shift away," in the art displayed at Edmonton city hall, "from an artistic sensibility that relied on a standardized theme for the city...to a focus on works that represent the lived struggles of those who have chosen this place as an adopted home" (154). Although it remains difficult to describe and assess "public art," it could—and for this very reason—be provisionally said that it is at its most impactful when it reflexively and subtly—that is to say, artfully—addresses this difficulty cum impossibility, in dialogue with the spaces, histories, and people it inhabits.

R. M. Pope

Notes

1. The allusion to "hunk of shit" is not unintentional. Is *Cloud Gate* not a wondrous, shiny gift of shit, in which the city and its people (and its tourists) are reflected? How else to explain the artist's obsessive insistence that each seam be rigourously polished and buffed to give the impression the object magically appeared—as though all of a sudden—in the 'town square'? With its conditions of production rendered invisible, the shiny object takes on the aura of the commodity fetish and alien gift.

2. This discussion could be transposed into cinema. Serra's cinematic equivalent would be the overly self-reflexive and distanciating Jean-Luc Godard, while Thomas' would be the more subtle and involving—while still reflexive—Krzysztof Kieslowski. The equivalent of *Cloud Gate*, of course, would be the big budget, special effects dominated, Hollywood event film that lost its storyline by the time it reached the multiplex.