

MAIN SECTION

How It's Made: Behind the scenes of Public Art production at Public Art Agency Sweden

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims at investigating what working structures and methodologies lie behind the implementation of artistic practices in urban spaces, through the case study of Public Art Agency Sweden, the leading institution dealing with public art projects in Sweden. Production processes of art in public space may often seem unclear and contorted, thus discouraging its inclusion in urban development and design projects. This problem is also stoked by a relative scarcity of scholarship regarding procedures and methods to develop public art projects: the present contribution constitutes a first attempt to start filling this gap, outlining both the bright and dark sides of Public Art Agency Sweden's model. This research has been carried out by the author during a six-months internship at the aforementioned governmental agency, where she did documental and bibliographic research in the agency's library and archive, interviewed staff members, participated in the agency's activities, and personally took part in the development of two artistic projects.

KEYWORDS

Public Art; Creative Practices; Urban Space; Methodology; Cultural Policies

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The paper aims at investigating what working structures and methodologies lie behind the implementation of artistic practices in urban spaces, through the case study of Public Art Agency Sweden, the leading institution dealing with public art projects in Sweden. Production processes of art in public space may often seem unclear and contorted, thus discouraging its inclusion in urban development and design projects. This problem is also stoked by a relative scarcity of scholarship regarding procedures and methods to develop public art projects: in fact, while several key texts have been published over the last thirty years, trying to define the new role taken on by public art in society,¹ the idea of site-specificity² and new alternative approaches towards public art³ for instance, focusing on what stands behind these interventions is still not very common. The present contribution constitutes a first attempt to start filling this gap.

This research is part of the author's PhD dissertation, developed at University of Ferrara's International Doctorate in Architecture and Urban Planning. Research has been carried out by the author during a six-months internship at the aforementioned governmental agency, where she did documental and bibliographic research in the agency's library and archive, interviewed staff members, participated in the agency's activities, and personally took part in the development of two artistic projects. This fieldwork experience allowed the author to have an insight into the agency's working methodologies and structures, which were seen first-hand while working on projects. Public Art Agency Sweden was chosen as a case study for several reasons, among which its interest in developing new methodologies and formats and in expanding the idea of what art in public space can be.

Since the first half of the twentieth century, art has increasingly been at the center of policies fostering its spread into urban space, as demonstrated by the worldwide diffusion of public art programs during those years.⁴ This situation further developed during the 1980s, when art and creativity were put at the center of culture-led urban regeneration processes, also promoted thanks to the success of Richard Florida's creative city idea.⁵ In Sweden, the question of allocating state funds for art was raised already at the turn of the 20th century, resulting in the Parliament adopting the One Percent rule as a model for financing public art in 1937. At the same time, Public Art Agency Sweden was established, with the mission of providing artists with work opportunities, of collecting artworks to be placed in state-run workplaces and of creating inspiring examples of public art in

1 Suzanne Lacy (ed.), *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995).

2 Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another. Site-specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002).

3 Claire Doherty (ed.), *Out of Time, Out of Place. Public Art (Now)* (London: Art Books, 2015).

4 Silvia Mazzucotelli Salice, *Arte pubblica. Artisti e spazio urbano in Italia e Stati Uniti* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2016).

5 Serena Vicari Haddock and Frank Moulaert (eds.), *Rigenerare la città. Pratiche di innovazione sociale nelle città europee* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2009).

connection with state-commissioned building projects.⁶ In 1997, Sweden introduced its first architecture policy, *Framtidsformer*, which became the starting point for implementing new approaches in working with architecture and public art. In the same year, the agency was commissioned by the government to work with an extended mission, which involved collaborating with non-governmental actors, such as municipalities, county councils and private developers: this became the occasion for the agency to test one of its first urban development projects (Mats Theselius, Håkan Johnsson, *Trafikplats Mölndalsbro*, 1998-2003), in collaboration with the municipality of Mölndal and the Swedish Transport Administration.⁷ In 2010 the extended mission was completed and the agency received a new assignment - *Samverkan om gestaltning av offentliga miljöer* - which consisted in collaborating with the Swedish National Board of Housing, Building and Planning, the Swedish National Heritage Board and ArkDes to develop and strengthen a holistic approach to the planning and construction of public environments. The assignment's objective was to spread good examples of how site-specific artistic design can contribute positively to an overall planning of public places and buildings. The mission resulted in thirteen collaborative projects located all over Sweden, which involved municipalities, private property owners and consulting companies, as well as professional groups such as architects, artists, engineers, planners and designers.⁸ The projects regarded environments such as travel centers, schools, residential areas, parks and hospitals. All projects took the location as their starting point and, through cooperation between different actors, they aimed at achieving designs that interacted with the history, use and meaning of places. Moreover, some of the projects were developed in dialogue with citizens, thus including new perspectives on public living environments.⁹ In making these projects, though, the agency's role was still pretty marginal, providing organizational support through its consultants, while the responsibility for the projects relied mostly on municipalities, property companies and county councils.

One step further was made in 2016, with the *Konst Händer - Art is Happening* assignment, which was part of a wider governmental investment in art and culture in certain neighborhoods called *Äga Rum*. This assignment caused controversy as it was formulated in a problematic way, stating that the artistic projects should increase democratic participation and primarily target low-voting turnout areas, thus creating fertile conditions for power asymmetries and tricky stigmatizations.¹⁰ The

6 Public Art Agency Sweden, *Public Art Agency Sweden website* (Swedish version), <https://statenskonstrad.se/> (last accessed June 22, 2023).

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Henrik Orrje et al. (eds.), *Konsten att gestalt offentliga miljöer. Samverkan i tanke och handling* (Värnamo: Elanders Fälv & Hässler, 2013).

10 Jonna Bornemark, "Maktens väggar och möjligheten att skapa det som ännu inte finns", in *Perspektiv på Konst Händer*, ed. Lena From (Stockholm: Statens Konstråd, 2021): 12-31.

agency decided to interpret the assignment developing projects in the so called "Million Program" housing neighborhoods, Sweden's late modernist dwelling areas built between 1965 and 1974, where it aimed at producing examples of what forms public art can take in that specific urban context, at creating new meeting places through artistic production and at developing new methods for citizens' participation and agency in the processes leading to the creation of public artworks.¹¹ These areas were chosen also from an urban history perspective, as no new art had been added there for fifty years and the urban fabric needed to be revisited.¹² This was really a turning point for the agency, as the project introduced the opportunity to work on contexts which were already both spatially and socially defined, without any building-related commission and in close dialogue with the civic society. Fifteen projects to implement were chosen all around Sweden, which were managed by Public Art Agency for three years, also thanks to the development of new methods and formats.¹³

Among the latest achievements of the agency has been the inclusion of public art in Sweden's new unified policy for designed living environments (*Gestaltad livsmiljö*), adopted in 2018 and based on a holistic approach taking into consideration not only physical spaces, but also social aspects. This policy involves four state institutions: the Swedish National Board of Housing, Building and Planning, the Swedish National Heritage Board, ArkDes and Public Art Agency Sweden. In particular, the agency received three commissions within *Gestaltad livsmiljö*, among which one dealt with providing methodological support for public commissioners in using the Percent for Art (*Hur bild- eller formkonstnärlig gestaltning kan integreras när staten bygger*). The objective was to find methods and models for collaboration and financing of visual arts in public environments: one of the results has been an increased interest from state property owners in bringing art early in planning and building processes.¹⁴ This was achieved both by establishing routines for collaboration and agreements regarding art with four of the main state property owners (Akademiska Hus, Swedish Fortifications Agency, Jernhusen, National Property Board) and by producing a practical handbook for government commissioners, describing working processes to make and maintain public artworks (*Offentlig konst – handbok för statliga beställare*).¹⁵

This brief review of the agency's main assignments allows an understanding of its position in Sweden's public art scene and of the institution's

11 Rebecka Katz Thor and Joanna Zawieja (eds.), *Art is Happening. Civic society as an initiator. Artistic productions of socially engaged art by Public Art Agency Sweden* (Stockholm: Statens Konstråd).

12 Interview Joanna Zawieja, 31/03/2023.

13 Henna Harri, "En känsla av tillhörighet – att arbeta som curatoriskt team", in *Perspektiv på Konst Händer*, ed. Lena From (Stockholm: Statens Konstråd, 2021), 126-139.

14 Public Art Agency Sweden's website.

15 Public Art Agency Sweden (ed.), *Slutrapportering av regeringsuppdrag om hur bild- eller formkonstnärlig gestaltning kan integreras när staten bygger* (Stockholm: Statens Konstråd, 2021).

interweaving relationships with city planning agencies. The author would like to conclude this overview by clarifying what are the public art projects' typologies the agency is currently working with. In fact, as mentioned before, besides collecting public artworks to be located in governmental buildings, the agency has carried out several site-specific public art projects. At first, these projects were aimed at the production of mostly building-related permanent artworks, thus adhering to a more traditional – though site-specific – idea of public art. An example of this category are the three art projects Alba Baeza and Peter Hagdahl are curating for University of Gothenburg's new Natrium building, as part of the art program *The Intimacy of Strangers* (2020-ongoing): in this context, for instance, artist Hanna Ljungh's *Curiosity Cabinets: Medicinareberget* proposal consists of a free-standing monumental salt stone cabinet and of five smaller cabinets with minerals that will be integrated into the walls of the building.¹⁶



FIG. 1

Katharina Grosse, proposal for bLINK. Source: Public Art Agency Sweden.

Today, these projects continue to be part of the agency's work, but they have been flanked by new formats, trying to stretch the borders of a by-now outdated idea of public art. In fact, many projects are no longer related to governmental buildings, but to wider public spaces and infrastructures such as squares, parks, nature reserves, whole neighborhoods and railway lines (urban development projects). For this reason, some of these projects are not relying on Percent for Art commissions, but on a dedicated public budget. They can deal both with local micro-scale and with national macro-scale. As for the micro-scale, the projects within the *Konst Händer* assignment (2016-2018), curated by a team consisting of Inger Höjer Aspemyr, Lena From, Peter Hagdahl, Marti Manen and Joanna Zawieja,

16 Public Art Agency Sweden's website.

can be taken as examples: for instance, Map13 Barcelona's *Paviljong* in Hageby resulted in the creation of a wooden pavilion in the neighborhood for people to meet, in collaboration with a group of newly arrived architects and engineers.¹⁷ As for the macro-scale instead, an important project that is currently being carried out is *Västlänken: Kronotopia* (2014-ongoing), curated by Lotta Mossum with the support of Alba Baeza and Ann Magnusson: in collaboration with the Swedish Transport Administration, the agency is working on a colossal infrastructure development project involving four sites, three train stations in Gothenburg (Haga, Centralen, Korsvägen) and a grade separation in Olskroken.¹⁸ As for the site in Olskroken, for instance, artist Katharina Grosse designed *bLINK*, a massive pink sculpture to be installed on a new railway bridge and allowing maintenance staff to access it and work on it through an internal system of stairs, heating, lighting, drainage and railings¹⁹.



FIG 2

Urbonas Studio, *The Swamp Observatory*. Photographer: Nomedas & Gediminas Urbonas. Source: Public Art Agency Sweden.

Moreover, both for building-related and non-building-related projects, artistic outcomes can be either permanent, temporary or take hybrid forms. As for temporary projects, an example is *Out of the Sky, into the Earth* (May-September 2022), curated by Edi Muka and Helena Selder: in collaboration with the Baltic Art Center, the agency produced two temporary artworks in Visby, *The Swamp Observatory* by Urbonas Studio – an AR app that visitors can use to observe and imagine new species or habitats in Visborg's ponds – and *Brakfesten/La Grande Bouffe* by Anne Duk Hee

17 Katz Thor and Zawieja (eds.), *Art is Happening*.

18 Public Art Agency Sweden (ed.), *Kronotopia. Övergripande konstprogram för Västlänken och Olskroken planskildhet* (Stockholm: Statens Konstråd, 2016).

19 Anna Lindholm and Lena From (eds.), *Offentlig konst. Handbok för statliga beställare* (Stockholm: Statens Konstråd, 2021).

Jordan and Pauline Doutreluingne – including a sculpture made of elm tree branches, creating a banquet for insects, birds and other organisms, and a film.²⁰ As for hybrid formats, this means that projects can either start with temporary interventions and take a permanent form afterwards or the opposite, that a permanent commission can be flanked with temporary artworks, or that artworks can take up semi-permanent forms. For example, the temporary interventions *Walk, hands, eyes (Gamlegården)* and *What can we know in such darkness?* by artist Myriam Lefkowitz in Kristianstad (2016) were the starting points for the permanent artworks *Förhandlingarna (The Negotiation)* and *Marmorlinjen (The Marble Line)* by Anna Högberg and Johan Tirén in the same site²¹. Another example is the *Liquid Interfaces: Open/Closed Gateways* project Lotta Mossum is curating for the University of Gothenburg (2023-ongoing), whose aim is to develop a semi-permanent project with a focus on digital art, that is an artwork which has a longer life than temporary projects – usually lasting only few days or months – and needs thus to be able to evolve and change over time.²²

Having outlined Public Art Agency Sweden's history and projects' typologies, the second part of this contribution will take a look behind the scenes, illustrating the agency's working structure and methodologies, in order to explain how artistic practices in public spaces can be implemented. As for this, interviews with staff members – including curators Alba Baeza, Edi Muka, Joanna Zawieja, Lotta Mossum and Peter Hagdahl, head of the Art Unit Lena From, director Patrick Amsellem and former director Magdalena Malm – have been crucial, providing precious insights into the agency's functioning. Up to ten years ago, the Agency was described by Magdalena Malm as a very bureaucratic, administrative institution, where most of the staff didn't have artistic competences and where there was no artistic vision, a problem that sometimes negatively affected the quality of its artistic production.²³ When Malm was appointed director in 2012, she thus decided to carry out a radical re-structuring of the organization, based on a strong idea: art must be the core of the institution, making the agency one of the first and few examples of this working model in the public sector in Europe. Malm explains:

Imagine a Kunsthalle that was part of the administration and didn't have an artistic leader: that would be behind the development of contemporary art. [...] The reason why public art has become so much behind contemporary art in general - I mean, now we're catching up slowly - is because it's not been artistically-led, because it was part of the administration.²⁴

20 Public Art Agency Sweden's website.

21 Katz Thor and Zawieja (eds.), *Art is Happening*.

22 Public Art Agency Sweden, *Liquid Interfaces: Open/Closed Gateways art program*.

23 Interview Magdalena Malm, 04/05/2023.

24 Ibid.

At the time, the agency used to hire external project managers to develop artistic projects, with the outcome of, on the one hand, being unable to produce projects and contents internally and thus commissioning everything outside the organization, on the other hand of not building knowledge from past projects, as external project managers were constantly shifting.²⁵ For this reason, Malm decided to permanently hire a team of full-time curators with artistic competences, which became the heart of the agency. This choice was very important for several reasons: first, it allowed a process of learning and building competence to work with art in public spaces, also thanks to the different backgrounds and perspectives of the curators who were selected (Edi Muka and Lisa Rosendahl were specialized in temporary projects and biennials, Joanna Zawieja was an architect, Lotta Mossum and Peter Hagdahl used to deal with permanent art projects).²⁶ Secondly, having full-time curators made it easier to relate to and engage stakeholders, especially in long projects lasting several years²⁷. Lastly, the curatorial unit started to do strategic work, which would have been impossible for external curators, as clarifies Peter Hagdahl:

In projects, if you're a consultant or if you're an employee, it is pretty much the same, because it's about producing a public artwork. The difference is what we do in the Art Unit: we talk quite much about the future and how we should work with strategies for the coming years, what kind of fields we should jump into and what kind of typical projects we should develop. As an employee, you're pretty much part of that strategy work, so that's the main difference.²⁸

Besides introducing the curatorial team, Malm decided to make decision-making processes within the agency more transparent by appointing a head responsible for each of the Agency's departments (art projects; mediation & communication; supervision, collection & administration).²⁹

One of the most important changes introduced by Malm was reshaping the role of project managers into that of curators, which was perfectly adherent to her idea of art as heart of the agency: it's key to clarify that this was not just a terminological shift, but an attempt to confer new and increased value to highly-specialized professional skills, which have had a hard time being credited during the last decades. Malm explains:

There wasn't this awareness of the curatorial position then, they didn't even call people curators. They were project managers or project leaders. So that was also a very important mark for me to say "this is an artistic profession, it's not someone who just coordinates a project".

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Interview Lotta Mossum, 03/04/2023.

28 Interview Peter Hagdahl, 27/03/2023.

29 Interview Malm.

If you are a good curator in public space, you create artistic value. It's an artistic profession, it's not about the technical coordination of a project.³⁰

Curator Alba Baeza pinpoints sharply the difference between the two roles, besides the many common tasks:

For me there is a nuance in between these two notions that is very critical, because of course a lot of our work is project management: you handle budgets, you handle administration, you do a lot of mediation between different parts, you write agreements, you do a lot of politics almost, implementing policies and so on. But the curatorial has a very significant added value which is the creative and critical reading of a context and of a certain situation. I think that's absolutely key for the quality of the resulting artworks.³¹

Moreover, despite several similarities with the work done by museum curators, all the interviewed curators were firmly convinced that curators working in public spaces need specific skills to carry out their projects and tried to outline the most relevant for themselves. Among the most mentioned, were socio-relational skills, such as the ability to mediate, translate and negotiate between artists, commissioners and audiences (Baeza, Muka, Zawieja, Mossum, Hagdahl), to build trust with other institutions and/or civic society (Baeza, Hagdahl), to facilitate and support artists (Baeza, Muka, Hagdahl, Malm), to be open-minded, listen and learn with humbleness (Zawieja, Mossum, Malm, Hagdahl), to know when to hold on with stubbornness and when to let go (Zawieja, Mossum), to be co-creative (Mossum, Zawieja), to be provocative and challenge artists (Hagdahl), to create space for art and to safeguard artistic perspectives (Mossum, Hagdahl), to do pedagogical work (Baeza, Zawieja, Malm, Hagdahl), to anchor art within its context (Muka), to be transparent (Zawieja), and to act with responsibility (Malm). Another set of competences regards more creative aspects, such as being able to create connectedness between artistic practices and specific contexts (Baeza, Muka, Zawieja, Mossum), critically interpreting contexts (Baeza, Zawieja), finding common threads and building narratives on projects (Zawieja, Mossum, Malm), being able of embracing context's complexities (Mossum), keeping openness in projects to foster integration of artworks and context (Mossum), working against social contexts' mainstream (Mossum), and doing problem-solving (Malm). Finally, the interviewees have framed a set of socio-spatial competences, such as being able to understand the needs of the context and its specificity (Baeza, Zawieja), working with a site-specific process-based approach (Zawieja), being able of understanding city planning processes, the role of different public institutions in society and of grasping the urban/architectural scale (Zawieja), and adapting to different

30 Ibid.

31 Interview Alba Baeza, 03/04/2023.

contexts (Mossum, Malm, Hagdahl).

Moreover, internal discussion and collaboration in the Art Unit have been fostered: while beforehand every project manager used to work on his/her own project, a more organic way of working started to be implemented, as clarifies Lena From:

I think the way we brought the discussion into this Unit - our way of working more journalistically in a way - has brought on a quality to the Unit, so that everyone's aware of what everyone else is actually working with for the time being. So, you know that this group is a resource that you can use regardless of what project you want to bring to the table. And that wasn't quite the atmosphere before.³²

This was taken to the next level when curators started working in teams, a method that was tested for the first time during *Konst Händer*: in fact, working with the civic society, curators had to work during weekends and evenings in order to allow citizens' participation. This led them to look for more sustainable ways of working, allowing members of the team to always have a backup in case they were ill or unavailable for any reason.³³ Lotta Mossum explains that she pushed for extending this way of working also to other projects, in particular *Västlänken: Kronotopia*, as during the first years she had a hard time to curate such a large and complex project by herself³⁴. Baeza explains that now every project is managed by at least two curators, three in the case of more complex ones, and describes this as a triangular rotating structure:

We meet once a week and we inform each other of what has been going on in our respective areas of responsibility. When we are out in the field, each of us takes different meetings and then we inform our colleagues. [...] And then maybe once a year or every six months we reassess how this team structure is going. [...] So, it's an ongoing discussion all the time about what works best. It's a very responsive methodology because we try to adjust and adapt to the necessities of each project more or less on a regular basis.³⁵

Another crucial methodological shift has been the introduction of new project formats, together with changing the workflow for permanent projects in order to produce higher-quality artworks. In particular, Malm introduced temporary projects for the first time and integrated urban development projects permanently in the agency's working, after the conclusion of *Samverkan om gestaltning av offentliga miljöer* assignment. To do so, she hired new curators with specific expertise: Edi Muka and Lisa Rosendahl for temporary projects, and Joanna Zawieja for urban development ones.

32 Interview Lena From, 25/04/2023.

33 Ibid.

34 Interview Mossum.

35 Interview Baeza.

For these kinds of projects, special budgets were introduced in order to be able to work without a commissioning institution. Moreover, essential was the importance of both *Konst Händer* assignment and *Västlänken: Kronotopia* project, as they required the agency to learn how to work both with civic society's small scale and with urban infrastructures' grand scale. Malm thought that this was a way to open up new perspectives on what art in public spaces could be, unlocking resources that were usually devoted to very traditional public artworks and creating new production opportunities for artistic ideas that were seldom funded at that time. Through publications, projects and events such as the *Creative Time Summit: Stockholm* (2014), perspectives on public art in Sweden started to change and artists who would have never applied for public artworks before started submitting proposals to the agency.³⁶ The introduction of temporary projects fostered experimental approaches and asked curators to reverse their usual way of working, as Edi Muka explains:

In coming to the Public Art Agency, what was intriguing for me was that it was a new challenge. It was about getting involved in something that was not there, because the institution didn't work with temporary projects before. [...] The permanent projects that we do are usually art in connection to buildings. [...] The building gives the context, gives both limitations and possibilities, because the artwork has to be connected to the architectural drawing, to places that are assigned. Sometimes it's possible to negotiate, sometimes it's not, but the artistic process follows a structure, so to say, and then you try to find the freedom within that structure [...]. In temporary projects it's the opposite. We try not to work within the structure. I mean, the structure exists there in terms of ideas, in terms of histories, in terms of context that one wants to investigate, but it has no foreclosed parameters when it comes to what is possible and what is not. So, the freedom for the artist is much bigger to really try and test and do whatever they have in mind. And that was also the idea why we started with the temporary projects: it was to try to provide this as-big-as-possible freedom for the artist to see what's possible to do and also to work with the question "what can art in public space be?".³⁷

Muka also points out that *Konst Händer* represented a turning point to start merging working methodologies, to open up processes and create new hybrid formats. In fact, these projects were not fully adherent to temporary nor to permanent building-related formats and thus gave the opportunity to test new solutions, as aforementioned examples show. *Konst Händer* projects also promoted an increased flexibility in working processes, which led to the introduction of the so-called step-by-step methodology: this implied maintaining flexibility in setting goals

36 Interview Malm.

37 Interview Edi Muka, 29/03/2023.

Building-related Permanent Art Project's Workflow

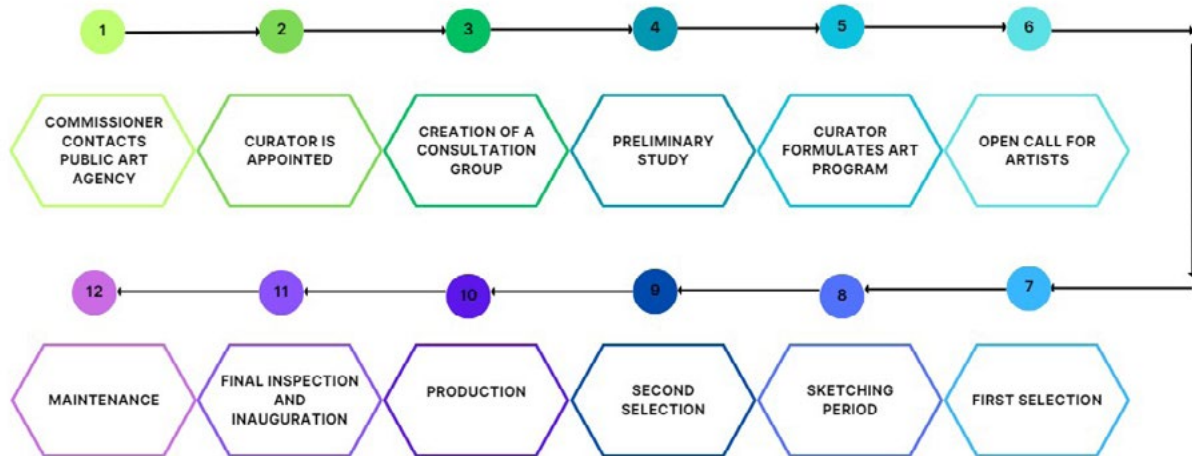


FIG. 3 Building related permanent art projects' workflow. Source: Irene Ruzzier

and visions so that the limits of what is possible are not set too firmly and too early, keeping open questions about art's format, theme, site and future management, and being able to constantly re-adjust the project's direction.³⁸ **Figure 3** illustrates traditional building-related permanent art projects' workflow: this is not a fixed model and can vary even in the case of permanent art projects, but it has been deeply revolutionized by *Konst Händer*. The process usually starts with a commissioner – usually a property owner planning to erect a new public building – contacting the agency to ask for artistic work. Then, the preparation phase starts with a curator (or curatorial team) being appointed and a consultation group being gathered. The agency claims that curators should be included in the planning process as early as possible in order to obtain a better integration between art and architecture and that they are both needed because they add artistic perspectives to the building process, and they create space for art during the process, avoiding it to be caught in between the many urgent necessities of the planning procedure, and because they can balance the building process's need for rational efficiency with the artistic process's need for sensitivity, securing high-quality results. The consultation group includes representatives of the various stakeholders involved in the project, such as architects, property owners and future users. In case of complex projects, the consultation group can have an advisory

38 Public Art Agency Sweden's website.

role and delegate the project's practicalities to a working group. If a project comprehends more than one art intervention (each with its consulting group), a steering group is formed to make overall financial and strategic decisions. Then the curator carries out a preliminary study with the group, assessing the opportunities for artistic expression, considering different procurement forms, investigating future maintenance possibilities, and establishing a preliminary budget. The curator then formulates an art program, a support document containing purpose, socio-spatial context analysis, curatorial vision, timeline, budget, distribution of responsibilities among the actors involved, typology of procurement procedure, artistic formats and other special conditions.³⁹ After the program is discussed with the consultation group and approved, an open call for artists is published, after which they are valued both through a set of bureaucratic and financial criteria and a set of qualitative criteria, such as the relevance of the artistic expression in relation to the curatorial vision, feasibility and artistic quality. In the past, procurement procedures used to be simpler, as artists were often invited directly to produce artworks: nonetheless, for transparency reasons, during the last few years, open calls have become predominant. The head curator reads all the applications, while other curators in the Art Unit read a certain amount each: everyone makes a longlist, which is discussed during an internal meeting in order to come to a shortlist to present to the consultation group and to a meeting gathering all the agency's staff (production meeting). Usually, two or three artists are selected and invited to work on a sketch, for a period which lasts at least three months. One or more mid-sketch meetings can take place, where the artist can ask questions to the curator and consultation group. At the end of the sketching period, the sketches are presented both to the consultation group and at the production meeting, and one of the artists is selected to produce the final artwork. As a last step, the artwork is produced, inspected and inaugurated. The production process, in large projects especially, can be very complex and last for many years.⁴⁰

In *Konst Händer* (**Figure 4**), as well as in temporary projects, there was no initial commission and no specific site. A multidisciplinary curatorial team was created, which started doing research about civic society's organizations to create partnerships and ways to interpret the government's assignment. Then a tour through Sweden was organized to present the project. After that, instead of writing an art program, an open call was published for the civic society to submit ideas about what citizens would like to change in their living environment. Among the 153 received proposals, 28 were researched by the team for six months and 15 were finally selected to be implemented. From that moment on, the curatorial team started working in dialogue with the civic society on site, with local project groups for example, to find effective ways to engage citizens in participatory

39 Public Art Agency Sweden's website.

40 Ibid.

Konst Händer Projects' Workflow

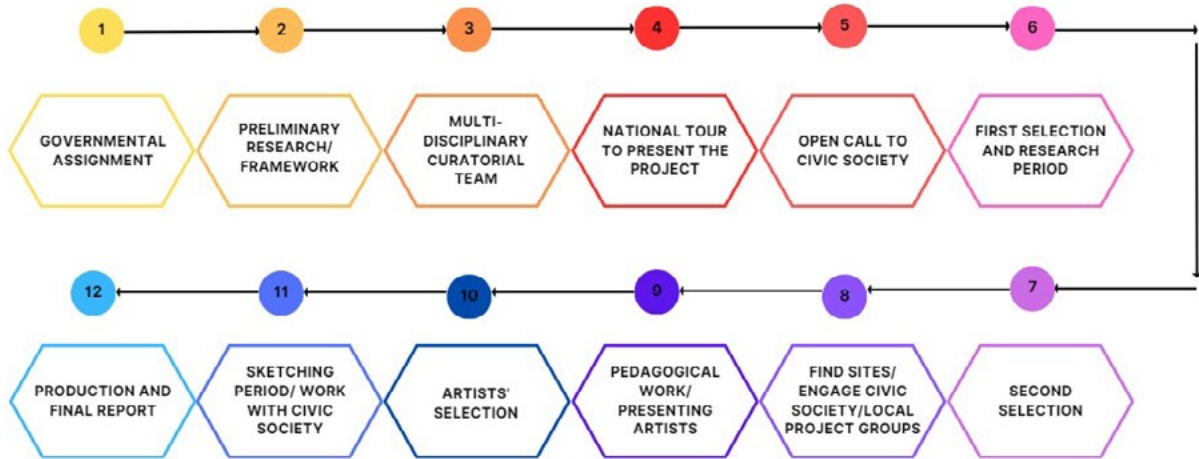


FIG. 3 Konst Händer projects' workflow. Source: Irene Ruzzier

projects (traditional meetings not being the best solution) and to find sites. The team developed pedagogical processes with the local project groups, and several artists were presented in relation to the chosen topics and sites. After that, artists were selected by the curatorial team in dialogue with local project groups. Then, the sketching period started, where artists worked together with civic society, the artistic engagement varying depending on the type of practice and context. Lastly, the artwork was produced and reported, with slightly different approaches to every site. Outcomes and formats varied very much, including both permanent installations and temporary artworks.⁴¹

Despite being criticized for not always being able to meet the hopes for participation from the involved dwelling areas and for introducing less stable working conditions for artists, Konst Händer has led to many positive results in terms of creating change through art and weaving relationships with the civic society, but most importantly it represented a turning point for the agency in opening up its working processes and experimenting new formats and methodologies, strengthening site-specific and collaborative aspects⁴². Moreover, From explains that these methods have continued to be reviewed and adjusted in next community-driven projects such as the ones in collaboration with Folkets Hus och Parker: in this case, the

41 Interview From and Zawieja.

42 Interview From.

process was improved by taking a longer time, having three-curators teams instead of two-ones and expanding the way for artists to work more freely with communities on site (without having to go through the process of applying and submitting reports or sketch proposals).⁴³

In 2020, Patrick Amsellem was appointed as new director of the Public Art Agency, kept the new working model introduced by Malm, and decided to introduce further improvements, such as creating more synergy between different departments by co-creating projects and sharing information, and as pushing the staff to have a more holistic perspective. Moreover, Amsellem is interested in promoting projects dealing with a higher degree of publicness, favoring accessible public environments on governmental buildings, and co-financed projects. Lastly, one of his main goals is to make the agency open to a wider audience, lowering thresholds and making people more comfortable in approaching public art: for this reason, great efforts have been made in activating the agency's collection through social media, in communicating with an accessible style and in designing a public program that could attract non-specialized audiences.⁴⁴

The analysis of Public Art Agency Sweden has allowed to pinpoint both this model's strength points and weaknesses, from a methodological and structural perspective. On the one hand, in fact, the presence of an institution dealing with public art on a state level brought about crucial achievements in the Swedish public art field, such as the opportunity to work on large-scale projects that could be hardly feasible for local actors, to stimulate public art's legitimization in the contemporary art's scene, to introduce new ideas about what public art can be, to act as a model for working methodologies to be spread all over the country, to build knowledge, to develop new working processes for public art, to support small municipalities lacking budgets and experience to work with public art, to empower small local partner institutions, to work with few high-quality projects and high-profile expertise thus setting standards, to have more financial stability than independent actors and to push for public art's inclusion in governmental policies and urban development processes. On the other hand, weaknesses include difficulties for a state institution to work with local contexts' specificities and to engage citizens, civic society's suspicion towards public institutions, dependency on political shifts and governmental assignments (which can be problematic in terms of content but especially of timing and funding), and a need to be transparent and responsible which doesn't always lead to top-quality artistic outcomes.

To conclude, Public Art Agency Sweden constitutes a complex and interesting example of how it is possible to work with art in public space: in fact, these processes can often look vague and unclear from the outside.

43 Ibid.

44 Interview Patrick Amsellem, 22/03/2023.

The present contribution, through a detailed analysis of its working structures and methodologies, aimed at clarifying how art in the public space is produced by the Swedish leading public art institution, outlining both the bright and dark sides of this model. The case study investigation has given an insight into public art production procedures that have been unveiled by the author through months of fieldwork and original interviews, with the objective of making them more accessible internationally.

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