

# PUBLIC ART & RAC: A HISTORICAL PRIMER

**MARCH 2023**

Written by Justice + Joy

PREPARED ON  
BEHALF OF



REGIONAL ARTS  
COMMISSION  
OF ST. LOUIS

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary	3
Methods	4
Timeline of RAC's Art Activities	5
History Research Findings	6
Insight & Analysis	10
Cultural and Political Context	10
Institutional Context	13
Operational Context	16
Conclusion	22
Appendix	23

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines the Regional Arts Commission of St. Louis' (RAC) history with public art since its founding in 1985. The historical summary was developed through document analysis and interviews with more than 20 key organizational and arts and culture sector stakeholders.

Within the region, there has been great interest in and passion for public art. That passion has been limited by a context of cultural and political conservatism that viewed public art as risky and contentious. Because RAC's primary focus has been on providing funding to arts and culture institutions and later to artists, it has been limited in its capacity to develop public art in the region.

Furthermore, operational challenges surrounding the implementation of the Ordinance pertaining to public art have left all parties frustrated by the many exceptions that limit Public Art Trust Fund contributions, and the lack of funds have constrained the Ordinance's fulfillment. Most parties involved in this report have desired better coordination around and funding for public art in the region. Although disappointed by how long St. Louis has faced an uphill battle building robust support for public art, many are committed to and hopeful of its future success.

RAC provides support and funding to arts and cultural programs throughout St. Louis City and County. The Ordinance that designates a public art role to RAC encompasses only the City. RAC has, however, provided support to partners throughout the region working on public art initiatives, including St. Louis County, although this is distinct from the purview of the Ordinance.



## METHODS

This history was compiled through document review and interviews. RAC provided print and digital archival documents, including the [2011 Percent for Art Ordinance #68793](#), the [2015 City of St. Louis Public Art Guidelines](#), developed by Via Partnership, and the [2018 Downtown Public Art Plan](#). Additionally, RAC worked with Justice + Joy to select 20 arts and culture sector stakeholders to interview who were knowledgeable about RAC's history with public art. These interviews provided an oral history which was paired with documentation to create a clearer sense of history. Questions discussed in these interviews are available in the Appendix.

The scope of this historical primer focuses specifically on recounting the story of RAC's history with public art. It is not intended to offer recommendations for next steps. Rather, this historical primer is the first step in a longer process to better understand RAC's role in public art and its possibilities for the future.

# TIMELINE OF RAC'S INVOLVEMENT IN PUBLIC ART ACTIVITIES

Since RAC's founding in 1985, the agency has spearheaded, collaborated on and supported various public arts projects, planning efforts, and policies.









## 1990-1999

-  *Community Plan for Public Art* engagement & report
-  First attempt to pass a public art ordinance


## 2000-2009

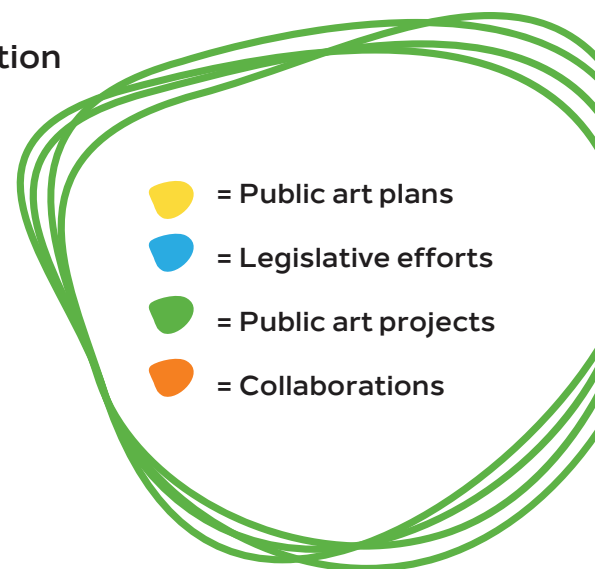
-  *The People Project*
-  Metro Transit and Bi-State Development Collaboration
-  RAC commissions Entry Doors for building (2003 & 2008)
-  Airport Experience Campaign

## 2010-2019

-  Public art ordinance passed
-  Metro & Arts in Transit formed
-  RAC commissions third "entry doors" installation
-  *Cakeway to the West* project
-  City of St. Louis Public Art Guidelines
-  For Freedoms Bill Board project
-  Downtown Public Art Plan
-  Truth Booth Installation

## 2020-Present

-  InSite STL
-  Choice Neighborhood Public Arts Strategy
-  *Public Art: History, Strategy & Capacity-Building Initiative*



## HISTORY RESEARCH FINDINGS

St. Louis has had a dynamic relationship to public art. While it is home to one of the most notable and largest public sculptures in the country, the Gateway Arch, it has also faced a conservative regional culture around public artistic expression. It boasts the longest running arts and community training program (CAT Institute) that has developed a regional network of people trained to use the arts as a tool for positive social change. Its unique *Mural Mile (Floodwall)* graffiti wall draws muralists and graffiti artists annually from all over the world.

At the same time, St. Louis has experienced complicated social and cultural disapproval of sculptures that shift public space or venture outside of the norm. When observing the public art throughout the region, one may notice an abundance of white male artists and a dearth of representation from other artists, not reflective of the talent in the region, nor the population.

RAC has been heavily lauded for its work as a regional arts funder, yet the institution has faced cultural, financial, political and institutional barriers in its attempts to serve as a public arts champion in the region. This report examines the Regional Arts Commission of St. Louis' history with public art since its founding in 1985.


### RAC's involvement in public art projects, 1985-1995

When RAC was founded in 1985, St. Louis was in an era of hot-button conversations around public art and public space. Its emergence amidst these controversies shaped the role the Commission has played in public art. Its founding followed two particularly high-profile public art projects. A few years prior to RAC's founding, the City had installed *Twain*, a large, expensive, and contentious Richard Serra sculpture<sup>1</sup>. Many St. Louis politicians believed it leaned into a "Rust Belt" reputation they attempted to avoid; many residents found the sculpture unappealing.

A few blocks away, artist Alan Sonfist's proposed *Time Landscape of St. Louis* project broke ground across from Union Station. Fearing the illicit activities the projects' park-like design might invite, including the gathering of unhoused St. Louisans, leaders and community members voiced their opposition. Ultimately, the project never grew to fruition. Such contentious efforts left St. Louis leaders and residents with concerns around public art investment.

---

1 [https://www.stltoday.com/news/local/columns/bill-mcclellan/mcclellan-hey-hey-ho-ho-serras-twain-has-got-to-go/article\\_fe481424-a5d8-55af-aef6-eea067130939.html](https://www.stltoday.com/news/local/columns/bill-mcclellan/mcclellan-hey-hey-ho-ho-serras-twain-has-got-to-go/article_fe481424-a5d8-55af-aef6-eea067130939.html)



At the time RAC was formed, it was with a clear mandate to serve as a granting agency for the arts and culture sector in St. Louis City and St. Louis County, not yet with any focus on public art. However, RAC’s founder and Executive Director was eager to engage in public art projects when possible. In addition to supporting some public art projects ad hoc, RAC implemented a handful of small public art initiatives, such as the People Project (2001), and the rotating front door art at the RAC building. RAC helped Metro Transit and Bi-State Development create the impactful Arts in Transit program, worked on integrating public art into the development of some City and/or federally-owned buildings, and occasionally funded public art projects presented to them.

### **First Attempt at a City Public Art Ordinance, 1995 (denied)**

In the almost three decades since this first effort, RAC has made meaningful attempts to develop the city’s public art infrastructure—including efforts for legislation, processes development, private-public partnerships, and temporary public art pilot programs—yet has never received the support necessary to realize a robust regional practice of growing public art.

RAC’s first formal foray into public art occurred in the early 1990s, when RAC collaborated with the Heritage and Urban Design Commission, St. Louis Development Corporation and consultant Harriet Traurig to develop the “Community Plan for Public Art”. This four-year study brought together a mix of arts stakeholders, city officials, and residents to comprise the Steering Committee for Public Art and Community Task Force for Public Art, which developed a proposal for a public art program for St. Louis. The report included a national review of Percent for Public Art Programs, recommendations for a public art program, model language for an ordinance, and an overview of the groups’ “City Neighborhood Ideas” engagement process, which solicited potential public art programs for each of the eight districts of St. Louis. Following the project, RAC’s founding director Jill McGuire proposed a percent for art ordinance to the city council in 1995.

The percent for art ordinance effort of 1995 gleaned mild public support, but did not overcome the existing cultural anxieties and associated political impasse around public art at the time. Notable supporters of the ordinance included a citizen task force, a handful of small arts and design businesses, and private citizens, as well as general support—though not a formal endorsement—from the St. Louis Art Museum.

Although the ordinance did not pass, the seeds of curiosity for public art had been planted. In 1998, the Missouri Growth Association expressed interest to Mayor Harmon to develop and draft a new ordinance, though they had

opposed the previous ordinance under Mayor Bosley. Despite interest in the topic, the legislation stalled for 15 years until Alderman Antonio French led a second charge to pass a public art ordinance, which passed in 2011.

### **St. Louis' City's 2011 Public Art Ordinance #68793 (passed)**

Built on RAC's past efforts and eventually adopted in 2011, Ordinance #68793, St. Louis City's ordinance pertaining to public art, was sponsored by Alderman Antonio D. French, and co-sponsored by Alderpeople Charles Troupe, Dionne Flowers, Freeman M. Bosley Sr., Samuel L. Moore, April Ford-Griffin, Kacie Starr Triplett, Terry Kennedy, Marlene E. Davis, Craig N. Schmid, Jeffrey L. Boyd, Shane Cohn, Frank Williamson, Gregory Carter, and Lewis E. Reed. Its first reading was in April 2010 and its effective date was December 18, 2010. The Ordinance took eight months to pass.

The Ordinance legally requires RAC to oversee a newly-developed Public Art Trust Fund for the City of St. Louis and the airport, formally approve and accept art gifts on the City's behalf, and provide a series of recommendations regarding budget, process, selection, and deaccession of public art.

Additionally, the Ordinance outlined that the Public Art Trust was to be funded via requiring Art-Qualified public projects to include 1% of their budget to go towards the fund. It further stipulates the 1% funding would be divided into three categories, with half going towards the development site, a quarter going to neighborhood projects, and the final quarter going towards art maintenance. The Ordinance also required that by 2012, the Commission provide a ward-by-ward survey of existing public art in St. Louis, and that neighborhood artwork projects be focused in wards with lower than average amounts of public art.

Though successful in formalizing a public art effort within St. Louis, RAC saw little change in proceedings following the Ordinance's approval.

### **City of St. Louis Public Art Guidelines**

In 2015, RAC contracted consultancy Via Partnership to develop detailed recommendations for an implementation plan. The "City of St. Louis Public Art Guidelines", defined and recommended remaining actions set by the Ordinance that had not yet been advanced. Via Partnership assigned roles and detailed processes, including the structures of committees, like the Commission and Standing Review Committee, as well as other suggested RAC-affiliated groups' roles, such as the RAC staff, and ad hoc art selection panels that oversee RFQs and RFPs on a project-by-project basis. The document recommends that RAC develop an Artist Registry to aid in artist selection for more specific projects, or those with tighter timelines. The Guidelines have not





yet been fully implemented, and as Via’s team has stated that “the ability to implement is limited by funding”.

### **Downtown Public Art Plan**

While the lack of funding for the percent for public art program stymied progress, RAC was able to move forward with some opportunities to address larger public art issues. The Downtown STL Public Art Initiative in 2017 was the first coordinated wide-scale public art implementation project and was originally focused near the Convention Center. This proposal was brought to RAC by Explore St. Louis with the request that RAC take the lead in funding and managing the effort.

The initiative grew to become a collaboration that also included Downtown STL, Inc., with facilitation by Via Partnership, and could be viewed as a pilot for neighborhood-based public art strategies. Ultimately, the plan proposed several additional tasks for RAC to take on in order to implement a public art strategy for St. Louis’ Downtown neighborhood. These proposals included funding and staffing a Downtown Public Arts Manager, committing an annual minimum of \$160,000 in funding towards the initiative, developing an inventory of all artwork downtown, developing a mural guidance resource, and conducting public arts training, similar to the training of RAC’s Community Arts Training Institute. Ultimately, this initiative led to a series of temporary public art proposals through InSITE STL, which at the time of this report were being implemented. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic, and leadership transitions at RAC and Downtown STL Inc., slowed the project significantly.

Although not the organization’s central focus, RAC has contributed immense effort over the years as a regional advocate to pass legislation formalizing a public art program in the City, and has supported the development of public art projects initiated by regional partners, as well as some led by RAC itself.

## INSIGHT & ANALYSIS

This historical inquiry elucidates three main areas of insight that have impacted RAC's performance around public art: cultural and political context, institutional dynamics, and operational challenges.

### 1. CULTURAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

#### Cultural conservatism has dictated public art


In the past four decades, St. Louis City and County have maintained a categorically traditional approach to the placement and content of public art, veering away from innovation in content, placement and financing. From stakeholder interviews, we found that historically, the preferences of the St. Louis decision-holders have been to focus on veneration, adornment and beautification and avoid social commentary and critique, such as the *Cakeway to the West* project (2014), which commissioned 250 sculptural, decorated cakes. Following the installation of Serra's *Twain*, St. Louis chose large scale arts investments that were aesthetically-oriented, like Dale Chihuly's largely decorative glass installations.

Further, public art has often been viewed more as an opportunity for commercial investment and development, focusing often on downtown. Thus, over the last decades, the St. Louis region has maintained a more rudimentary understanding of the role that civically instituted public art can play in impacting a region. One interviewee pinpointed "a lack of understanding of the significance of public art in the broadest of terms, not just high art... and what it does for the human soul, for everyone. Art is something that can relieve, inspire". Nonetheless, stakeholders maintain that a strong general interest in public art has persisted throughout the years, despite some wins and some losses, and a culture that is risk-averse when it comes to public art.

#### Regional fracturing has kept efforts disconnected

As a regional entity, RAC has been tasked with serving a dual role as an arts grantor and convener/ambassador for both the City and County of St. Louis. This has provided unique complexities and opportunities in its role to administer public art, particularly through navigating the policies and politics of public art. While its public art portfolio has often focused on the City, the fractured nature of the region creates a challenging landscape for RAC to provide support or leadership for public art processes in the County.

Some cities in the County have further developed public art infrastructure, such as the City of Clayton, which has both a public art plan and an active



public art ordinance. Yet even with this infrastructure in place, Clayton has not sought out RAC for guidance, and RAC has not been significantly involved with their public art process. When speaking with one of Clayton's key public art stakeholders, we learned that he was unaware that the City of St. Louis even had a public art ordinance.

### **Politicians have had control over public art**


Within the City, public art has often been impacted by the preferences of elected officials and their perceptions of public art. At the mayoral level, there was enthusiasm around art more broadly during the tenure of Freeman Bosley Jr. from 1993-1997, and then reduced interest and investment in public art during the tenure of Mayor Francis Slay from 2001-2017. This lack of executive support stymied the launch of the 2011 Ordinance, which tasked RAC with administering the City's public art collection and its maintenance. The effects of this inter-chamber schism continue to impact RAC and public art to this day, as key procedures and provisions get stalled.

The public art ordinance was initiated by Alderman Antonio French, and interviewees suggested that because of political distaste for public art's potentially provocative nature, racism towards French, who, at the time was perceived as a bold, young Black elected official, many stakeholders pushed for changes to the Ordinance that protected their interests. These exceptions were eventually written into the Ordinance in order for it to gain the political support to pass, but they minimized the impact of public art and the potential for the Public Art Trust Fund to accumulate. As one interviewee put it, "it was political and personal".

### **Local efforts have been prioritized over regional collaboration**

Apart from some municipal commissions and committees such as Creve Coeur, Clayton, Kirkwood, Webster Groves, University City, and Chesterfield, there are few regional peers also taking an active role to create public artworks in the region. The Gateway Foundation was frequently cited as playing a significant role in the funding of public artworks throughout both the city and the county. Their urban sculpture garden, City Garden, was commonly referred to as one of the best and most publicly beloved examples of public art in the region. Additionally, Via Partnership has served as a key regional expert, often providing consultation to larger civic and private institutions.

Recently, Kranzberg Arts Foundation (KAF) and CounterPublic have begun public art programs. RAC is a funder of Counterpublic and a funding partner of some of KAF's other projects, and continues to support them as they grow. KAF has only recently developed a public art practice with a focus on murals



on privately-owned buildings within the Grand Center District. Counterpublic has taken on a more equity-centered approach to public art; it engages in an array of mediums and geographies (both city and county), temporary and permanent works, and is working on both private and public land. Both newer initiatives have plans to develop robust public art practices and assets for the region, and are interested in collaborating with other groups in the community. This would be a departure from a history with little coordination to a more regional approach of collaboration around public art.

### **County municipalities have undergone robust but unconnected efforts**

Although RAC's purview is region-wide, the public art ordinance is specific to the City of St. Louis. There appears to have been little coordination regionally around public art. In the mid-twenty teens, RAC staff member Dan Tierney, who also served on the Creve Coeur Arts Committee at the time, convened a group of regional public art organizations. While interviews suggest that little came of this organizing effort, it is worthwhile to note that this effort provided foundational work to connect public art organizations across the region. Via Partnership noted that over the years, many county municipalities have contacted Via about rotating sculptures and best practices. Many of the municipalities have had public art committees, however, managers of the public art assets and process are typically Parks staff with additional core responsibilities and therefore minimal knowledge of and capacity for public art tasks.

The City of Clayton is the seat of St. Louis County, and therefore also holds key civic institutions and buildings within its boundaries. Clayton passed a public art ordinance in 2002 and is supported by a Public Art Advisory Committee. Of note, this ordinance does not include a percent for art program. Even with prioritized arts investment and strategy, there is heavy reliance on private/nonprofit involvement and funding in the city to acquire and maintain artworks. Clayton experiences some of the challenges that permeate the region: lack of coordination across departments, minimal public art knowledge and training, and a feeling of scarcity around funding resources. Clayton Community Foundation leadership noted that there was significant potential around developers who might support public art, but that has been previously untapped.

Leadership in Chesterfield, Missouri by private developer Lou Sachs and Stacey Morse, the Executive Director of Chesterfield Arts Council, is also noted as having laid significant groundwork for public art development in this suburban municipality.

## Public artists have sought support elsewhere

For ease, public artists have preferred to work with private funders and privately-owned sites to create their artworks. All were unaware of RAC's role in public art, and unaware of the City Ordinance and the City's general public art processes. Some public artists with direct connections to RAC staff have approached RAC to support with advocacy or maintenance of public artworks. Although artists did not necessarily think of RAC as a partner in public art, non-arts partners & community groups have reached out to RAC for public art-related inquiries but weren't sure of when in a process to do so, or what role RAC could be expected to play.

## 2. INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

### Staff capacity has been focused on granting and programs rather than public art

Two past staff members tasked with RAC's various public arts activities were Roseann Weiss and Erika Fiola, who have had some training around public art, civic processes for implementation and/or public space, but desired more knowledge and/or jurisdiction to fully execute public art tasks. In discussing their roles, both mentioned that RAC relied heavily on consultants for technical expertise around public art. Further, the expectations around their role tied to public art initiatives were far less structured than those of their other tasks.

Weiss attempted to grow local capacity for public art by leading workshops on applying for public art projects and best practices. She and Arts in Transit founder, David Allen, also developed a curriculum to be called PAT: Public Art Training, which was never implemented.

Both at the City and within RAC, interviewees specifically addressed a lack of expertise in public art procurement and maintenance. The aforementioned lack of funding tied to the Public Art ordinance further diminishes both parties' ability to invest in these areas. Without the funding for a full-time public art staff member, RAC has heavily relied on consultants to build out public art plans and activities, most recently Via Partnership. While consultants have allowed RAC to act on their unfunded mandates, it has hindered institutional capacity building.

Following the Downtown Public Art Plan, RAC was tasked with hiring a full-time Downtown Public Art Manager who would work out of the Downtown STL Inc. office and manage the public art plan, as well as develop standards and practices around public art activities. While Via Partnership developed a

role and job posting, the role was never published or filled due to leadership transitions and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the organization.

### **Leadership has greatly impacted the approach to public art**

Throughout RAC's history, interviews suggest that RAC's leadership has had a large impact on the prioritization of public art. RAC's founding Executive Director, Jill McGuire, expressed a passion for public art, and tried hard to develop this portion of RAC's practice over many years. She was integral to both the 1995 and 2011 efforts to pass a public art ordinance in the City, and led political organizing to rally support around this issue.

When Felicia Shaw stepped into the Executive Director role in 2015, she focused on developing more consistent and equitable processes for grantmaking and other organizational activities. Elements of this focus on equity and process found its way into RAC's public art efforts. Under her leadership, consultant Via Partnership developed Guidelines for the Ordinance. Similarly, when Explore St. Louis approached RAC about commissioning public art for the convention center, RAC provided funding to complete a collaborative strategic planning process. The resulting Downtown Public Art Plan and InSite STL were both in process when Shaw left her position in November of 2019.


A year later, amidst the pandemic and ensuing fiscal strain, Vanessa Cooksey took the helm at RAC. Cooksey's interest in building on past activities to grow RAC's role in public art is generating the multi-year *Public Art: History, Strategy & Capacity-Building Initiative*, of which this report is a part.

### **Commissioners have not had a role in public art**

Historically, Commissioners have not played a significant role in public art processes at RAC. In interviews, the majority of Commissioners did not surface any significant activity around public art during their tenure. One Commissioner noted limited knowledge on the Commission surrounding both the public art ordinance and of public art more generally. Many emphasized that RAC has other focus areas that are central to its role, and that "public art has not been centered at all". It was also noted that due to turnover, if Commissioners did not enter their roles with institutional public art history, they simply would not gain the knowledge. It appears that there has not been significant education around RAC's role in the public art ordinance, nor education around public art more broadly for Commissioners.

### **The region has lacked a comprehensive public art strategy**

Without funding or capacity, developing a strategy around public art at RAC never took hold. While certain strategic efforts did exist, such as Via



Partnership's guidelines and implementation plan for the Ordinance, the lack of central oversight of the roles associated with the Ordinance left it without much integrity and its associated processes without consistency. This then left RAC's efforts around public art to be initiated by other sources. For example, Explore St. Louis came to RAC with a proposal that led to the Downtown Public Art Plan, which RAC funded, and the City's (largely the Board of Public Service and Parks and Recreation) frequently forwarding of gift requests to RAC for review. In neither of these circumstances is RAC initiating actions around public art, contrary to its prescribed role in the Ordinance.

Regionally, the lack of significant public funding for public art has led leaders to seek private donations to support their programs, maintenance, staff, and funding throughout various municipalities. Despite the ubiquitous desire, no one has built functional civic infrastructure that can capitalize on developer contributions to funds that could support public art projects, a need many have articulated as an obvious source of financing, and one that was common in peer cities. Lastly, processes around public art, even within the same municipality, have not historically followed a consistent process. This lack of regional strategy has largely left each municipality to figure it out independently.

### 3. OPERATIONAL CONTEXT

#### The public art ordinance has been minimally executed

The Ordinance has divided some responsibilities to RAC and some to the City and its specific departments. Below is a general sense of the roles the Ordinance assigns to the City and to RAC.

The prescribed roles for the City include:

- Establishing a Public Art Trust Fund
- Providing funds to be administered by RAC
- Provide for the use of funds
- Inform RAC of City sites, opportunities, plans or policies which might be appropriate for or relevant to public art

The prescribed roles for RAC include:

- Devising programs, plans and policies around public art
- Develop and administer a comprehensive management program for the City's public art
- Develop and maintain city-wide inventory
- Develop policies for artists
- Assess gifts
- Recommend art or aesthetic enhancement for City projects
- Create public art education programs
- Set up selection panels

Of all of these prescribed roles, we found that only the following have been met since the establishment of the Ordinance:


City's roles enacted:

- None
- *The City has been sending proposed or gifted artworks to RAC for review. Although not clarified as a role for the City in the Ordinance tasks, it is clarified in RAC's role*

RAC's roles enacted:

- Assess gifts
- Initial efforts around developing and maintaining city-wide inventory, never concluded






The main activity for RAC that has come out of the Ordinance is the evaluation of public art gifts for approval/disapproval. These gifts often come from neighborhood organizations and are presented to the Board of Public Service (BPS) and/or the Department of Parks, Recreation and Forestry. Commonly, proposals arrive with an artist pre-selected, an artwork envisioned, a location determined, and in some cases, a finished model. The City's preference has been that proposals come in earlier in their conception, allowing time for RAC to provide feedback. In these circumstances, RAC has supplied guidance on fundraising, selecting an artist and/or presenting aesthetic recommendations.


After receiving a proposal, one of these two City departments sends the proposal to RAC to evaluate the artwork, artist and location. RAC recommends approval, disapproval, and/or changes. The City and RAC work together to understand a maintenance plan from the proposing body since there are no City funds to maintain the artworks. If temporary, the work goes to BPS for a permit.

Besides gift assessment, few other tasks assigned in the Ordinance have been enacted by either the City or RAC.

### **Restrictions have reduced the efficacy of the Ordinance**

Below are the main historical challenges that have prevented both the City and RAC from carrying out the tasks outlined in the Ordinance.

1. There are so many exceptions to an “Art-Qualified Project” (for example, projects supported by specific funding mechanisms are excluded) that most development evades qualification for paying into the Public Art Trust Fund
  2. No sources could recall a Public Art Trust Fund balance ever above \$0
  3. Without oversight, enforcement and clear processes, many entities skirt public art process and requirements
  4. Mandates without funding mechanisms make any significant work on a public art program for the City challenging for RAC to undertake
  5. There is no specialized expertise in public art within RAC or City staff to take command of the public art program
  6. According to an interview, a strategic step to ensuring the development of the Trust Fund would have been to develop relationships with the construction project departments, which the Mayor at the time prevented. Those relationships were not built and this, despite what seemed to be excitement from the Comptroller, has been identified as a key reason the Trust Fund never received funding.
- 



While the public art ordinance was a significant piece of legislation that advanced the possibilities of public art in the City of St. Louis, much of its policy language, as well as the lack of operational oversight and resources to implement its tasks, make the Ordinance a promise unfulfilled. All parties knowledgeable about the Ordinance shared that its potential has not been realized and expressed frustration with the limitations in the Ordinance as well as the way it has been enacted by the involved parties.

Despite the limitations, the success of the Ordinance is the fact that its establishment planted seeds of the importance of public art in the City, it designated a steward of the public art collection, it attempted to allocate funds for areas that aren't getting capital investment, and it attempted to prioritize neighborhood-level public art.


### **Funding has been obsolete**

Over a decade after the passage of the public art ordinance and establishment of the Public Art Trust, the Trust appears to have not received any funding due to broad exceptions in the Ordinance. Without funding, RAC has had limited capacity to hire public art-oriented staff, commission pieces, fund maintenance, or put together a meaningful strategic plan around public art for St. Louis.

Local funding for public art efforts more broadly is limited. Artists and administrators share that they often seek either private funding or grant funding from outside of the region to realize their projects. While RAC serves as a key funder for many artists and art organizations, one artist interviewed has not considered RAC for financial support related to public art specifically. An arts administrator shared that their organization sought funding outside of the region because public art funding is lacking locally, and they did not want to compete for dwindling resources. Many cite the Gateway Foundation as an important regional source for public art funding.

### **Critical City partners have been essential**

The essential government partners who have worked closely with RAC on public art are the Board of Public Service (BPS) and the Department of Parks, Recreation, and Forestry. In key government roles, individual staffers have often had an influence on maintaining relationships and collaborations. Additionally, turnover rates impact how partnering entities experience the services and authority of government departments. Because turnover has been limited in some essential roles, Kimberly Haegele (Parks Commissioner), Greg Hayes (Director Department of Parks, Recreation, and Forestry), and Rich Bradley (President of the Board of Public Service) were able to offer wide



historical knowledge and appear to be leaders that value the collaborative role that RAC has played.

Findings consistent across departments include a view of RAC as the expert on public art. Both departments have viewed RAC as an authority on art and have relied heavily on its expertise to make recommendations. City departments also posit an awareness of the severe limitations of a vacant Public Art Trust Fund, minimal staff knowledge of and time for public art, inconsistent processes when choosing whether or not to engage RAC, and an awareness of the importance of maintenance but the lack of budget to support conservation.

The Board of Public Service Department of the President “is responsible for all public works and improvements undertaken by the City or in which the City is interested, and prepares all plans and specifications thereof, except where supervision work or preparation is otherwise provided by the member departments of the Board of Public Service”. Rich Bradly has served as its President by mayoral appointment since 2009. One of the important roles BPS plays is accepting donations to the City, which includes public art. BPS typically engages RAC to support decision-making around accepting gifts of public art, and occasionally on maintenance issues.

BPS leadership noted that while their department is not formally in charge of the Ordinance, people often come to them and ask how to navigate tasks related to public art. Not only has BPS felt under-equipped to answer these questions but BPS indicates it is not their role to oversee the Ordinance. It has been noted that RAC’s mandate as a curatorial body has allowed for the City to forward to RAC potentially contentious issues or decisions, which has resulted in the City obviating potential conflict.

Similarly, the City has engaged RAC inconsistently, sometimes bypassing them. Furthermore, BPS is well aware that there “hasn’t been funding in the Public Art Trust Fund for a while.” Both BPS and other interviewees discussing BPS mention that there continue to be challenges around maintenance plans and budgets for public artworks owned by the City.

The Department of Parks, Recreation, and Forestry’s challenges and opportunities are similar. A fair amount of the City’s public art collection is on the City’s Park land. This department also articulated inconsistent processes around engaging RAC in public art projects. They share that they “skipped RAC when there was a statue that a citizen group wanted to restore, but when there is a new request, [they] go through RAC”. Because RAC has tended to serve an advisory role, determining the appropriateness of a proposal, Parks, Recreation & Forestry expressed concern over proposals often coming in to them with

“too many plans concretized before they talk to RAC.”

Department staff recognize that RAC holds important knowledge in the process of creating quality public artwork that meet city protocol, but also that those who propose public artworks have limited knowledge about the process of working with RAC. Of major concern to this department is the maintenance of artworks in their jurisdiction. Staff expressed that they don't have the expertise or crew to maintain it. They typically must request an outside source for a maintenance budget, often through private donation, due to a lack of maintenance budget for art in their department.

### **Maintenance has been crucial but receives little support**


With no funding in the Public Art Trust, there is no budget to fund routine maintenance, nor are there any staffed positions or contracts aimed at art maintenance and conservation. In most interviews, we found that donors often propose to fund maintenance privately, even if a work is on City property. Further, RAC nor the City has developed standards for maintenance plans once a piece is installed.

The lack of maintenance capacity has often resulted in pieces only receiving care if an individual outside of either agency takes it on. In one interview, a stakeholder explained that their organization has been responsible for the maintenance of a large notable piece, even though the piece is city-owned and on city land. The Clayton Community Foundation also voiced similar concerns for their collection.

### **There has been no central steward of the public art ordinance**

While the creation of the public art ordinance seems to have been a positive step forward, many noticed there is no central entity in charge of ensuring that the Ordinance is followed and that processes maintain consistency and integrity. Several stakeholders laid out an opaque process of how public art gets implemented in the City. The President of the Board of Public Service, for example, explains that while he “isn't in charge of the public art ordinance, people come to him a lot and say ‘how do we do this?’. The Ordinance talks about all these things that have to be done in order to do public art, but there is still a lot of gray area around how and who.”

Artists and residents have found themselves confused when trying to navigate the process, and sometimes experiencing redundancies. One artist shared that when they wanted to put a piece on a city-owned median, “the Alderman sent us to Streets or Parks, who sent us to another Department, who sent us to RAC”. The lack of process has also inhibited the success of public artworks, even if they reach installation.



One of the largest challenges around the lack of process is that people and projects may receive disparate levels of service. While RAC consistently attempted to help artists and art projects acquire funding, without a formal program or rubric for selection, outcomes varied. Further, people or entities without a relationship to RAC did not know what sorts of services, funding, and technical support the agency could provide them.

Neither RAC, BPS or Parks, Recreation and Forestry have attempted to take the helm as the central steward of the Ordinance. However, it is not clear based on the legislation who should play a leadership role. Moreover, with a historically vacant Public Art Trust Fund, it is clear that for either RAC, BPS or Parks, Recreation and Forestry to have spent significantly more time and energy as a leader of the Ordinance, further investment would have been required. Ultimately, this has left the Ordinance without enforcement. Without Ordinance enforcement, the Public Art Trust fund has continued to be obsolete.

## CONCLUSION

The labor of love from RAC and its partners towards developing public art in the past four decades has been palpable. Significant progress has been made around accomplishing important public art projects as well as laying the groundwork that eventually established a public art ordinance for the City of St. Louis. Despite RAC's primary role as a regional funder, the organization has also made some of the most significant contributions to the development of public art in St. Louis.

Within the region, there has been great interest in and passion for public art. That passion has been limited by cultural and political environment that has viewed public art as risky and contentious. It has been impacted by the institutional reality of RAC's capacity necessarily focused elsewhere. Furthermore, operational gaps and inefficiencies surrounding the implementation of the public art ordinance has left all parties frustrated by the many exceptions that limit Public Art Trust Fund contributions, and how the lack of funds has constrained the Ordinance's implementation. Most parties have desired better coordination around and funding for public art in the region, and have been disappointed by how long St. Louis has faced an uphill battle building robust support for public art. There has been a continued desire to improve the public art infrastructure and resources to match the potential and enthusiasm within the region.

To move the region forward, RAC is committed to identifying the best path for its future role in public art. Other steps in this work may include establishing new protocols, processes, decision-making structures, a policy map and more. We welcome feedback. Please send emails to [publicart@racstl.org](mailto:publicart@racstl.org).

# APPENDIX

## INTERVIEWEES

Interviews conducted in fall 2022

- Cbabi Bayoc, Artist
- Richard T. Bradley, President, Board of Public Service
- Laura Cohen, former RAC commissioner
- Alex Elmestad, Executive Director, Clayton Community Foundation
- Erika Fiola, former Director, Grants and Strategic Initiatives, RAC
- Gina Grafos, Director of Visual Infrastructure, Kranzberg Arts Foundation
- Kim Haegele, Parks Commissioner, City of St. Louis
- Greg Hayes, Director, Department of Parks, Recreation, and Forestry, City of St. Louis
- Rosalind Johnson, Secretary, RAC Board of Commissioners
- Mont Levy, RAC Commissioner, Member at Large, RAC Board of Commissioners
- James McAnally, founder and Artistic Director, Counterpublic
- Jill McGuire, Founder and former Executive Director, RAC
- Meridith McKinley, Principal, Via Partnership
- Andréa Purnell, RAC Commissioner, Vice Chair, RAC Board of Commissioners
- Kitty Ratcliffe, President, Explore St. Louis
- Emily Rauh Pulitzer, Art Historian
- John H. Russell, Treasurer, RAC Board of Commissioners
- Thomas Sleet, Artist
- Cheryl Walker, Chair, RAC Board of Commissioners
- Roseann Weiss, former Director of Artist and Community Initiatives, RAC

## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Justice + Joy prepared custom interview questions for each stakeholder ahead of scheduled interviews. We used a semi-structured format, sometimes deviating from prepared questions to ask follow ups, or learn more about new topics that arose. Below is a combined list of questions asked during stakeholder interviews. At the end of every interview, we asked all stakeholders if they had any recommendations for additional stakeholders to reach out to, and if they had any additional thoughts on the subject of public art and RAC.

- We want to understand how early on RAC was thinking actively about public art. Was public art a consideration or priority in RAC's founding days?
- Can you walk us through the process of developing and getting the ordinance passed?
- We know partners have often sought out RAC for partnership on public art pieces. Can you tell us a little about some of these public art project partnerships and how they came about?
- Has RAC developed any key relationships to individuals, organizations, agencies that have helped build RAC's public art program over the years?
- Have you ever interacted with RAC's public art practice and/or ordinance? How?
- Have any local institutions supported you in developing your skills as a public artist?
- Have any local institutions supported you in funding, installing, commissioning, displaying and/or maintaining your public artworks?
- How do you find partners to create artworks in public places?
- What support have you needed as a public artist?
- What has the process looked like for public art installation?
- How have you worked with RAC for public art installation?
- What has been your personal experience with RAC's public art program, as a Commissioner?
- To what extent do you think the Commissioners were/are aware of the Ordinance?
- When did your firm's relationship with RAC begin? How has the collaboration and work together evolved around public art?
- What were the goals of your Ordinance Guidelines? What have the successes and challenges been to RAC implementing the Guidelines plan?
- What do you think have been RAC's biggest hurdles in moving forward public art in the region?
- How would you say RAC's public art capacity has evolved through your support? Where do they still need to develop around public art?



- Have you ever worked with RAC on anything related to public art?
- Did you know there was a public art ordinance for the City of St. Louis? If yes, what do you know about it?
- Who have you worked with regularly on public art (i.e. funders, city departments, local orgs, consultants, artist groups, etc)?
- Do you have to work with the City with your public art works at all and if so with whom?
- What have been the differences in approaches across leadership at RAC?
- How have you thought about your organizations' approach to public art?
- Do you work on County-owned land? Is there any public art on any of that land? And if so, can you share what that process is like?
- Was your organization involved in the public art plan?
- What are your priorities around public art?
- Who owns and maintains public art in your jurisdiction?
- How has your organization built capacity around public art?
- Have you ever weighed the pros/cons of having public art on city-owned land, and if so what were the things you considered?
- What was your role at RAC?
- When working with individual artists, what kinds of needs and questions have come up around public art and how has RAC been able to attend or not attend to those?
- What do you think the biggest challenges are to the current public art ordinance?
- Have you conducted any community engagement during your public art installation process?
- Which changes to public art over time have you noticed?
- What has been your personal experience with the local public art ecosystem as a resident?
- How did you interact with public art in your role at RAC?
- Have there ever been separate attempts to bolster public art?
- Do you have any information about the history of St. Louis funding landscape that might connect to RAC's public art history?
- How do you think our culture and values come out in public art historically?
- As a resident of STL over the years, what have you noticed about public art and/or the political will around public art?

## LIST OF REFERENCE MATERIAL SOURCING

Justice + Joy received two physical binders with historical documents from the Regional Arts Commission, as well as a USB drive with digital documents from current and past employees' documents relating to public art. Below are the documents referenced in this report:

- Public Art by Ward, 2012,
- [Percent for Art Ordinance #68793, 2011](#)
- [City of St. Louis Public Art Guidelines, 2015, developed by Via Partnership](#)
- Proposed Projects: PDFs/ Documents submitted to RAC from community members or organizations
  - Basquiat National Fitness Court
  - St. Louis City NAACP RFP for Sculpture Honoring Civil Rights Leader Frankie Muse Freeman
  - The Max Starkloff Legacy Project
  - Carondelet Housing Corporation, Murals on Broadway
  - David R. Francis Memorial
  - Neuro Blooms in St. Louis
  - Citizens for Modern Transit
  - Unknown/Untitled Baynard Building
- Proposal Current and Past RAC Project Documents
  - Make It Public! Art Workshops flier
  - EVOKE Report
  - Truth Booth Project write up
  - Metro & Arts in Transit station RFP
  - Norman Seay Park Murals RFP
  - Airport Commission RFP
  - Choice Neighborhoods Public Arts Strategy, Arts Selection and Project Management MOU
- RAC Building Entry Doors Commission RFQ
- InSITE 2020 Report
- Downtown Public Art Initiative
  - Downtown Public Art Kick Off Event Flier
  - Downtown Public Art Management Contract with VIA Partnership
  - [Downtown Public Art Plan, 2018](#)
- Correspondence
  - Letters of support for the 1995 Ordinance, five entities
  - Letter of interest in developing new ordinance in 1998, Missouri Growth Association
  - Various emails from commissions or staff regarding public art projects