

ART

for Whose Sake?

Public art now proliferates on Vanderbilt's campus, but is there rhyme or reason to what winds up here?

By BONNIE ARANT ERTELT, BS'81

In an October 2003 *Vanderbilt Hustler* essay, senior columnist John Lee wrote about the “Tree of Learning” by Greg Wyatt, the most massive of Vanderbilt’s Newington Cropsey sculptures, on the lawn of the Central Library. Noting that the official campus literature describes the tree as representing “knowledge and how it is espoused and passed on year after year,” Lee offered this commentary: “Supposedly, there are hands clutching candles that symbolize the ‘passing on of knowledge’ and little buds all over the tree that represent the new generation in learning. Folks, that tree does not look covered in new growth; it looks diseased. If all those people in the sculpture are involved with the ‘passing of knowledge,’ it must be a pretty painful experience. ... It kind of reminds me of fall semester finals.”

“Public art,” Jerry Allen once wrote, “is something of a contradiction in terms.” Allen knows this firsthand as current director of the Office of Cultural Affairs for the city of San Jose, Calif., whose successful public art program has been recognized as a model for how to go about the process. In his 1985 essay on “How Art Becomes Public,” Allen explained that the phrase “public art” joins “two words whose meanings are in some ways antithetical. We recognize ‘art’ in the 20th century as the individual inquiry of a sculptor or painter, the epitome of self-assertion. To that we join ‘public,’ a reference to the collective, the social order, self-negation. Hence, we link the private and public in a single concept or object from which we expect both coherence and integrity.”

To this equation, add the subset of the public found at Vanderbilt—an elite, private educational institution with a largely affluent and conservative student population combined with the largest staff of any private employer in Middle Tennessee. Then, mix in the thousands of patients and family members on campus at Vanderbilt Medical Center. Considering this level of diversity, how can “public art” be defined at Vanderbilt, and what roles does it play in the life of the University and Medical Center?



Allen, who has spoken twice on campus through the Public Art Forum, a lecture series that ran four years and was co-sponsored by Vanderbilt's Department of Art and Art History, the Metro Nashville Arts Commission, Visual Arts Alliance of Nashville (VAAN) and others, wrote in the above-named essay that as an outgrowth of the first Percent for Art ordinance passed in Philadelphia in 1959, public art was still in the process of becoming. Public art, he maintains, is more than an object placed in a public place for an extraordinarily wide audience.

"Public art," he wrote, "represents the volatile crossroads of the artist's personal sensibilities with public notions informed by sentimental and long-abandoned approaches to art." Art created for public places in Western society before the modern period expressed beliefs and values through commonly held symbols that were part of the visual vocabulary of the society as a whole. Meaning in art was derived from the society, not the artist.

Only in modern times has art derived its meaning from the artist. As a result, modern art requires work on the part of the viewer in order to impart meaning. Without the incentive to work for meaning and without a proper education in the modern vocabulary, meaning for the viewer can be lost. The end result is the controversy that accompanies placement of many public works.

"The world is much more three-dimensional than ever before," says Nashville sculptor Steve Benneyworth, who has placed work in numerous cities, including "Web" in Hillsboro Village near campus. "Ideas are much more three-dimensional. Without the ability to visualize, to think three-dimensionally, you can't have the breakthroughs you expect in literature, science, medicine and art. You have one-sided information. Art is an interdisciplinary process, but academically, it's treated as an adjunct to learning. It becomes a side business, and then they don't bring it back and show how those skills relate."

As a result, says Benneyworth, the audience for public art is largely uneducated and "doesn't know what to do with it." Benneyworth placed sculpture on the Vanderbilt campus in 1977, but it was maliciously destroyed before his outdoor exhibit officially opened. Twenty-two years later, the same fate met work by artists Lain York, Jeff Hand and Erika Wollam-Nichols, whose installation "The Only Difference" was destroyed outside Branscomb Quadrangle.

It would seem a given that art on a university campus would gain some relevance through its ability to inform the transient population on campus about the history of the institution. At Vanderbilt this is why there are sculptures representing Commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt and Harold Stirling Vanderbilt.

"'The Commodore' is a perfectly acceptable academic work of art that says what it's supposed to say," says Annabeth Headrick,



assistant professor of art history. “He stands in a noble position, the placement with the [Kirkland Hall] tower behind him. That’s why we use it in photos all the time, because it says ‘university.’”

“I’m sure it dates from the late 19th century, so historically it’s significant,” says Vivien Fryd, professor of art history, “but in addition to that, Vanderbilt founded the University, the University is named after him, so it makes sense to have this piece of public art and have it sited near Kirkland.”

One of the most important pieces of public art on campus is also one of the lesser known. A mosaic by Ben Shahn, just inside the front doors of the Hobbs Development Laboratory on the Peabody campus (see sidebar below), quietly overlooks the lawn in front of Peabody’s Hill Student Center.

“As an art historian, it is incredibly exciting that we have two public murals [in Nashville] by two famous artists from the early part of the 20th century who were com-

“The Commodore,” a statue of Cornelius Vanderbilt by Guiseppe Moretti, was presented to the campus in 1897. For years the piece was slowly deteriorating due to neglect and high levels of vehicle emissions on West End Avenue, but it has received extensive conservation work in recent years.



NEIL BRAKE

“Peabody—1968”

Mosaic mural
Ben Shahn

Located in the Hobbs Laboratory of Human Development on the Peabody College campus, Ben Shahn’s (1898–1969) “Peabody—1968” represents the last major work by this influential American painter, printmaker, graphic artist and photographer of Lithuanian birth.

Intended as a visual representation of the interconnectedness of all life, and further supported by an excerpt incorporated into the work from 17th-century physicist Robert Hooke’s (1635–1703) seminal book, *Micrographia*, Shahn’s mosaic mural is a powerful work of art and social statement. Commissioned in 1967, the design was completed the following year in October.

Shahn held the Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry chair at Harvard University, where today a major archive of the artist’s paintings, photographs, prints and posters resides in the Fogg Art Museum’s collections. A series of public lectures given while at Harvard, which constituted his aesthetic treatise, were published in 1957 by Harvard University Press under the title *The Shape of Content*.

—Joseph Mella

mitted to do what turned out to be the last public monuments of their lives,” says Fryd. “In the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, we have the last mural Thomas Hart Benton did before he died. He and Shahn were contemporaries and American scene painters, though Shahn is considered to be a social realist and Benton a regionalist. The iconography of the Ben Shahn mural appeals to the meaning of the school [Peabody], so the location of the mural is appropriate. It’s a historical document, but it needs to be paid attention to.”

“Most people don’t know about the Shahn mosaic,” says Joseph Mella, curator of the Vanderbilt University Fine Arts Gallery. “I’d love to see the lighting reworked and a bench put in so that one might be able to spend some time with it. Also, the text that accompanies the mosaic could be redone. Unless one is familiar with art history, one

would never leave with the impression that this is by an American artist of note.”

“The Commodore” by Guiseppe Moretti and the Shahn mosaic represent the apex of historically important art on campus. Most pieces are by contemporary artists of note, regional artists or students.

“Anything that was placed on the campus prior to 1915 has significant historical meaning,” says Fryd, “but pieces placed on campus in the last 20 years should have an important message and should have excellence in style and composition. That doesn’t mean they have to be aesthetically pleasing.”

One aspect of public art on campus, say faculty and staff in the art and art history department, is that pieces should serve as the best possible model from which students can learn about art and ideas. Of the pieces on the University side,



NEIL BRAYNE

“Splishsplash” by Maurice Blik is the centerpiece of the Friends Garden at Children’s Hospital. Originally from Amsterdam, Blik, who now resides in London, interweaves symbols of hope, awakening and freedom in his work. The piece originally was conceived as a memorial to Alexander Martin, who died of a heart attack at age 10. Before Blik finished the piece, Alexander’s mother, Mary Farris Martin, died of a heart attack at age 42. The piece now honors both.

16 bronzes donated by the Newington Cropsey Foundation in Hastings-on-Hudson, N.Y., comprise the bulk of public sculpture on campus.

According to Judson Newbern, associate vice chancellor of campus planning and construction, former Chancellor Joe B. Wyatt heard about the Foundation and its programs from Fred Thompson, JD’67, former U.S. senator from Tennessee.

“The senator contacted the chancellor’s office, and it fell to me to look into it. I thought the work certainly had merit, the ones I had seen. I then met with the director of the program, who was the artist-in-residence at St. John the Divine, and he came to visit and was very taken with the campus and the grounds. Then Chancellor Wyatt and his wife went up to look at the studios in Hastings-on-Hudson and were even more intrigued with it.”

The Web site of the Newington Cropsey Foundation says that its educational programs promote values they say are intrinsic to the 19th-century works of the Hudson River School painters. The Foundation publishes *American Arts Quarterly* which, through its articles, links morality and spiritual transcendence with American landscape painting of the 19th century, and “good” art with a rejection of post-modernism. One recent article characterized multiculturalism as the basis for what is seen as a lack of aesthetics in contemporary public art, and many of the articles speak of a return to the common cultural ground of the 1850s, when American society understood

its symbols, which were based in Western iconography. The works placed on campus are largely by graduate students studying at the academy affiliated with the Foundation, though two pieces are by Greg Wyatt, director of the academy and resident sculptor at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine.

Some faculty have difficulty with the narrow definition of art espoused by the Foundation and by the fact that student work has been placed on campus. Headrick once spoke about the pieces to the art and art history department’s Graduate Student Association.

“If you do some research on Newington Cropsey, it’s an institution that believes there is a right way to do art and a wrong way to do art,” says Headrick. “It’s completely opposite of what Vanderbilt is trying to do as an institution. We give students options and expose them to a variety of things, and we hope they come to their own conclusions or have some understanding of difference and variety.”

“What I found most telling is that I’ve had students say to me, ‘I thought [the Newington Cropsey sculptures] were bad, but since they’re on campus, they have the University’s validation, so I question my ability to judge the quality of it.’ It’s OK to judge the quality! It’s student art, and it’s not even by our students, which was another thing that the students objected to. They said if we’re going to have bad student art on campus, at least let it be *our* bad student art.”

Joseph Mella agrees. “I think it would be far more successful if [efforts to display art on campus] were an exercise to incorporate Vanderbilt students. There’s nothing wrong with being a young artist, but are we going to learn that much from them? I think the people who are learning are the student artists [from the academy]. It’s wonderful for them, but I don’t think it’s all that wonderful for us because the result is art of varying quality.”

Newbern, however, defends the student work. “Each piece has been custom-designed, and is small enough to occupy a side area,” he says. “Ten years or so ago, there was some controversy about [Professor of Art and Art History, Emeritus] Don Evans’ nudity in a photograph. The art faculty came up with bumper stickers that said ‘Fear no art.’ But then these bronze pieces came in, which are cer-

tainly due some respect, and the faculty took the high road intellectually. They wouldn't touch it because it had already been categorized as conservative. Several [of the student artists] have come into the United States [as immigrants] and had a lot of issues, like female genital mutilation and religious oppression. A lot [of sculptures] were very personal. I think they are interesting statements. These kids are not just doing schlock stuff."

Mella suggests possibly creating an annual competition in which one or two promising Vanderbilt students might work through a committee, making a presentation, doing a site analysis, and receiving feedback for installing a temporary piece on campus, much as an artist commissioned to do a work of public art would do.

"The Newington Cropsey pieces should rotate through and then be returned to the Foundation," he says. "Vanderbilt wants to be a world-class institution, but they're selling themselves short by exhibiting works by young artists unless they're on a temporary basis."

When the Newington Cropsey pieces initially arrived seven years ago, there was no one person or committee that worked with placing art on campus. That has changed. Now there is an acquisitions committee for exploring public art possibilities on campus as well as a committee that works specifically with the Newington Cropsey bronzes, the last four of which were placed last November. Newbern saw the need on the University side of campus for a better defined process—a process that was put in place about six years ago at Vanderbilt Medical Center after the arrival of Donna Glassford as director of cultural enrichment.

"We wanted to expand Donna's success at the Medical Center and pull it into the campus as well," says Newbern, "so Donna heads the acquisitions committee. It was clear that with Chancellor Gee coming on board a few years ago, we needed more of a process. He has instructed me to put one-half percent of construction budgets into art. However, it's the departments' money, so we have to fig-

ure out how to balance that."

Glassford has figured out how to accomplish this balancing act at the Medical Center. A sculptor herself, she was on the Metro Nashville Arts Commission for five years and helped usher in the Percent for Public Art program for the city.

"Public art is kind of new to the campus," says Glassford. "It's a whole cauldron full of different ingredients and if you hit it right, you've done well. I have a five-member committee at the Medical Center that reviews proposals, and then, for example, I take it to the University committee. We've got good representation now on that committee from the entire campus, and we're going to add another person from outside the University for a two-year term so we can bring new people on."

On the medical side of campus, Glassford is attuned to the healing aspects of art. Her office handles all the therapeutic arts programs for the Medical Center, including those involving music and writing, rotating art exhibits in public spaces, and public art



"Indeterminate Line"

**Bent steel
Bernar Venet**

Bernar Venet is an internationally known sculptor, conceptual artist, musical composer, filmmaker, poet and performance artist.

His sculptures are designed around the beauty and simplicity of arcs and lines and how these forms integrate within the general physics of space. The artist's "Indeterminant Line" series was born from high-speed hand drawings—the idea transferred to massive steel shapes. Venet explains them as linear forms that depart from regularity according to no particular plan.

—Donna Glassford

NEIL BRAKE

placement. Her office also is in charge of maintenance for all public art pieces on campus, both at the Medical Center and the University. She has succeeded in bringing work by internationally known contemporary artists such as Bernar Venet (see sidebar, page 35), Fletcher Benton and Guy Dill to the Medical Center, as well as creating opportunities for regional and local artists to show work. For Glassford, art in this context must be part of the healing process.

“There’s a huge difference between what you expect of public art at the Medical Center as opposed to the University,” says Glassford. “It has to be non-confrontational. Controversy is tough, because you want the environment at the Medical Center to be less stressful. I’m not trying to educate anybody about art; I’m trying to enhance the environment.”

With the new Monroe Carell Jr. Children’s Hospital at Vanderbilt, which officially opened in February, the opportunity to enhance the environment was planned from the beginning right along with the architecture—the first building on campus to thoroughly fuse plans for the two.

“It usually comes about the other way around,” says Glassford. “This time it didn’t, and it’s a beautiful space. For Children’s Hospital, we had a separate line item for art. I felt it was important that we call on local and regional artists, and we received more than 260 responses. We have other instances where we’re working with donors. Then, the process is a little different. In the case of Maurice Blik’s piece *Splishsplash*, which is the focus of the Friends Garden at the Children’s Hospital,

the piece honors young Alexander Martin and his mother. I understood the new building, and I presented five sculptors to the family and they ultimately chose. Then I took it to the committee.

“A lot of times I’ll have a space and I’ll bring an artist in and say, ‘I want you to look at this spot and show me what you would do with it.’ [From January through April] we had a public art piece by local artist Adrienne Outlaw in the mezzanine gallery of Vanderbilt Hospital called ‘Vessels of Grace.’ I’ve always wanted to do something around the concept of a wishing wall, and this piece puts people’s wishes or dreams, written on slips of paper, in these beautiful, golden vase-like containers.”

Outlaw has created collaborative and interactive public art pieces for other locations in Nashville, including “The Prince,” a mobile

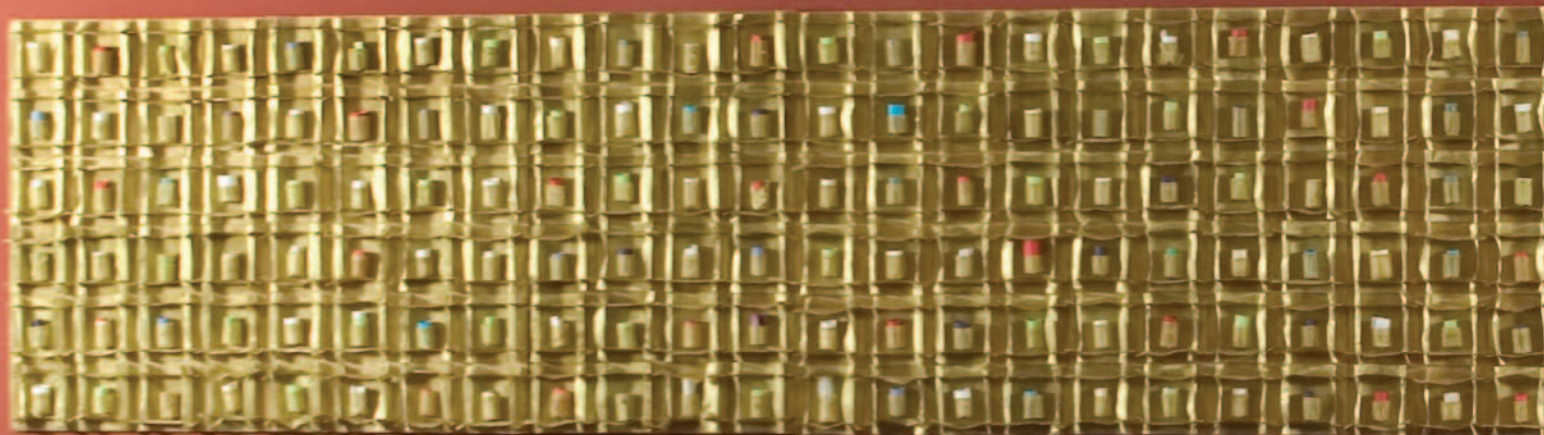
installed in the children’s section of the downtown Nashville Public Library. For “Vessels of Grace,” Outlaw conducted workshops around town at places like Congregation Micah, Gilda’s Club, and the Frist Center for the Visual Arts to create the 216 brass mesh boxes that comprise the 3-foot-by-18-foot piece. At the same time Ben Roosevelt, a Vanderbilt Divinity School student, collected “prayers of hope” for the boxes. Each basket held about 40 slips of paper rolled into scrolls. In an interview with the *Tennessean’s* Alan Bostick, BA’82, in January, Outlaw explained her reasons for working with so many people.

“It struck me with almost a physical force how many people go into a healing process. ... Because of that, I wanted to make a piece ... that would involve the entire community



NEIL BRAKE

“Vessels of Grace” by Nashville artist Adrienne Outlaw adorned the mezzanine gallery of Vanderbilt Hospital from January through April of this year. “It’s like a gigantic prayer wall,” Outlaw explained in a published interview earlier this year. “It’s something people can look at aesthetically, but also know that there are hundreds of thoughts and prayers inside.”



as much as possible. I feel that the more people participate in a work of art, the more they will feel part of it. I hope that leads to a sense of empowerment.”

“Call it ‘interactive public art,’” wrote Bostick, “and expect to see more of it in the art world. As artists everywhere invent new ways to relate to viewers in light of the increasingly complex vocabulary of a complex world, inviting others to get involved is one way to improve the dialogue.”

Another way to improve the dialogue is to put into place methods to educate the public about the art that inhabits their space, as well as to invite feedback from the public. Vanderbilt’s co-sponsorship of the Public Art Forums was one way to familiarize the public with more contemporary questions and concerns of public art. When pieces are already in place, sometimes the public makes its concerns known.

“We had a piece placed at the Medical Center that created quite a negative reaction,” says Glassford. “Because I’m trying to make the environment less stressful, and staff and patients viewed it so negatively, I removed it after eight months.”

On the University side, no controversial pieces have been removed. But if the quality and meaning of work on campus fosters discussion, one thing everyone agrees upon is that more works by world-class artists would put Vanderbilt in a league with institutions like Northwestern University, with its pieces by Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore, or Yale and the University of Michigan—



In 1981, “David” took up residence in the atrium of Vanderbilt’s Blair School of Music. Commissioned by Anne Potter Wilson, this small piece was created by Alan Lequire, BA’78, whose newest work is “Musica,” a 40-foot-tall bronze-figure grouping of nine dancing nudes now installed in Nashville’s Music Row roundabout.

Ann Arbor, with works by Maya Lin, creator of the Vietnam Memorial. *How* to acquire work of that caliber is the question.

“One of Chancellor Wyatt’s goals [in bringing the Newington Cropsey pieces to campus] was to get people talking about art,” says Newbern. “He said it bothered him that Vanderbilt, with the sophistication of its graduates, had never had people come forth with major public art.

“If someone wants to give us a Calder or any other contemporary piece, we would certainly welcome that,” says Newbern.

“World-class art has to be commissioned,” says Mella, “or you have a committee that seeks out pieces. You try to showcase and integrate things that are the best of what we as humans can produce, and that gives a good model. [If] you have a Calder or a Ben Shahn or things that are done by world-class artists, which is not unusual on university campuses, those are useful and important. They are important not only in their aesthetic value, but much more in their ability to create an environment that shows the ideas behind the thing, that stretches people’s imaginations and their ideas about what art is.” ▼

Bonnie Arant Ertelt, BS’81, arts and culture editor of Vanderbilt Magazine, is a visual artist who has exhibited at the J.B. Speed Art Museum in Louisville, Ky., and Bell Museum of Natural History in Minneapolis, among others. Her work is in the corporate collections of Arco and Sun-Trust Bank and in many private collections.

