

‘NOT ANOTHER BRONZE PLAQUE’: Making Text Work in Public Art

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Every work of public art contains text in some form- a title, a list of donors, a narrative. The inclusion of text in public art is most successful when it is part of the design process from the very beginning.

To expand and illustrate these points, in June of 2005 I delivered the above named talk at the Americans for the Arts Public Art Conference in Austin. I presented the questions I ask myself in creating my own work, which uses text as a core element, and offered examples of my work and that of others to explore these questions and their answers. The following outline is a list of the questions I have found helpful to ask as I reach for the goal of creating a work which seamlessly integrates text, form, and space. Though the range and specificity of these questions is particularly pertinent to memorials and monuments, where text is often used, they should prove helpful whenever text is being integrated in a work of public art.

About Ted Clausen

Ted Clausen is a public artist and a text consultant to numerous public art projects. Each of his public artworks uses text as a core element. His previous experience as a typeface designer and lettering artist informs his ability to facilitate the use of text in public works, and to integrate the written word into his own works. His portfolio can be viewed online at Sculpture.org, and by searching his name.

1. WHAT TEXT IS CHOSEN?

What is the role of the text in this work?

- Is it informational?
 - Title of work/name of artist
 - Lists of donors, civic leaders,
 - Descriptive, educational?
 - To state a quote, statement, or speech
- Is it to memorialize a person or a group?
 - Does it contain lists of names?
 - Do you need to be able to add to the list in the future
- Is it to tell a story?
 - What kind? narrative first person, narrative 3rd, descriptive
- Is it to explain an intended meaning/effect?

Specifically what text is to be used?

- What needs to be there?

- What might enhance/deepen the experience?
- Foreign languages? Translations? Braille? Why, why not?

Gathering, editing and approving the text.

- Gathering the text
 - Given by committee?
 - Gathered/ edited by the artist? By the artist with community/student involvement?
- Editing the text
 - What is the process? Who is involved?
 - What is the goal? Detailed description or sound bite? how little/how much?
- Arranging lists of names
 - Alphabetically? Chronologically? By group/regiment/force?
 - What information do you include? dates, addresses, survivors, cause of death
 - Must there be a list or can names be separated by other elements?
 - Should 'insider' terms be considered (eg.: 'pull box' for fire alarm)
 - Do you want to differentiate with different types of text? (names/quotes/rank)
- Who approves the final version of the text? What is the process?

2. HOW YOU DESIGN FOR THE TONE OF THE TEXT?

What is the tone of the text ?

- celebrative
- inspirational,
- solemn,
- informational/educational
- humorous,
- questioning
- contemplative

In the public art context various levels of legibility can be used to create specific effects. You may design less legible text into a piece in order to slow the visitor down, or to emphasize a point. You may use one font style to integrate a work, or many styles to indicate many voices, or periods in history, or events. You may make reading a longer text easier or more difficult depending on how you use the following elements:

- font style (sans serif, roman, historical, handwriting, novelty,)
- font type (roman, italic, bold, capitals, lowercase)
- size of type (one size or a variety)
- spacing (letter/word/line)
- line length
- line shape
- justification (flush right /left/centered)
- color

How do the choices of each of the above elements effect:

- duration of reading?
- emotional tone (personal/impersonal)
- sense of voice (spoken/written; formal/informal)
- sense of inclusion (multiple languages/translations, braille)
- clarity of message (overall theme, specific elements)
- integrated effect of the work as a whole

3. HOW DO YOU INTEGRATE YOUR DESIGNS WITH THE OVERALL CONCEPT OF THE MEMORIAL?

You may find that the text inspires a spacial layout or the design of the forms, or you may find the space and formal elements inspiring the way the text will be experienced.

When considering the design of all the elements for an entire work, I find it helpful to remember that more often than not, less is more. Fewer elements thoughtfully arranged often create a more powerful and valuable experience than many elements trying to do many things thereby competing with each other for the visitors attention.

-What is the nature/quality (ies) of the visit?

- to look at the work from a distance only? (car)
- to walk around the work?
 - a specific or self defined journey/path
- to walk through or into the work?
 - a specific or self defined journey/path
- Timing- is this a quick visit (passing in a car), or more leisurely walk. Will people sit to read?

What are the formal elements of the work?

- figurative?
- architectural?
- nonrepresentational?
- water?

-How will you use text with the other formal elements?

- will it explain/describe the formal elements?
- will it add another dimension? (emotional tone, facts, etc.)
- will it be a major formal element itself?
- will you use it to direct a path/journey?
- will you use it to lengthen/shorten the visit to one aspect of the work?
- Do you want the text read from far away?
- When do you want your visitors to read what?
- How quickly do you want people to read each part? Why?
- Do you want visitors to touch the text? (emotional connection/rubbings)
- Where do you place the text?
 - Seen/read from below, eye level, below eye level?
- Do you want your visitor to walk on/sit on text?

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