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Mary Louise Schumacher | Art City

Potential got lost in translation

Zweig's public art plan needs to be seen in context

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Janet Zweig, one of the most thoughtful public artists working in America today, creates art that inspires and is fundamentally about civility.

You might not have known that to hear [the debate over her proposal](#) for E. Wisconsin Ave. that erupted in recent days.

There was much measured, insightful discussion, sure, but also a rash of insults, oversimplifications and confusion.

What ultimately got glossed over in the din of the debate about how to administer public art here is a sense of what this art project in fact is and how lovely it would be for the city. Supporters of the project have been encouraged to attend a special public hearing before the Public Works Committee at 8 a.m. Tuesday in City Hall Room 301-B. If Zweig's design gets the nod from the committee, it may then go before the full Common Council that morning at 9 a.m.

[Zweig](#) plans to use an old-school technology for a wonderfully contemporary and unexpected application.

Imagine the familiar whirring sound of mechanical flap signs, once common in train stations, activated by passing pedestrians, offering an invitation to look closer. The physicality and sounds of the flap signs are evocative of many things - a sense of occasion associated with travel, early forms of filmmaking, a sense of destination, departure and place.

But instead of a rapid-fire flipping from one city to another, from "Paris" to "Rome," quiet little animations about Milwaukeeans would be spun out in the in-between space, flip-book style. There is

something poetic about embedding stories from our fly-over city in the in-between-ness of these otherwise pragmatic signs.

A trio of scenes would be tucked in each of the five kiosks and mixed and matched, creating different tales based on the sequences. The overall experience would unfold, too, as people walk from kiosk to kiosk, seeing one animation after another.

These artworks, installed on lamp posts along E. Wisconsin Ave. in front of Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance Co., would function like a lot of Zweig's work.

Her artworks do not just sit in the urban environment, like so-called plop art, waiting to be noticed. They roll up their sleeves and do a bit of work. They reach out and tap into our curiosity in simple ways, creating something inviting, playful and serendipitous right on the street. More than that, by enticing passers-by in for a peek, they create an occasion for an old-fashioned exchange of a word or two among strangers.

The dynamic this creates - of people encountering art and each other, watching animations about encounters between Milwaukeeans - seems rich with potential. That these stories are cinematic by nature seems fitting, too, since filmmakers are a driving engine in the creative community here.

It is difficult to talk about the specifics of the Wisconsin Ave. project beyond that, though, since the stories these cinematic sequences would tell have yet to be written. Zweig plans to hire local artists and filmmakers to help her write and create the animations, which will feature silhouetted figures.

Context from elsewhere

For that reason, Zweig's past work in several other U.S. cities provides some important context.

I particularly love - and find apropos to the current discussion - a piece made for a Minnesota journalism school. "The Medium" creates a setting for a non-conversation conversation.

It's a cozy niche that seats two, face to face. But the human connection is visually interrupted by back-to-back video screens. Instead of talking to someone, you talk to a live feed of them. You watch each other on TV, and agree to be watched in order to watch. There's often another layer of watching too, of people who gather around, which adds an element of spectacle.

It's a cautionary tale about the nature of technology and mediation. The media-generated version of a source that's close enough to see and touch can be more seductive, novel and distracting.

I couldn't help but think about this work as we watched Zweig's ideas translated through a city engineer, frustrated aldermen and a flurry of breaking news and opinion in recent days. Nowhere in the media maelstrom did we hear Zweig's ideas delivered by Zweig herself.

Zweig is good at presenting her ideas, and I am quite certain that our elected officials would have been "feeling it" had they heard from her directly.

Twin Cities turned on

People in Minneapolis were most certainly feeling it when she created interactive kiosks for light rail stations there. And not just the art crowd either. That project was different from her Milwaukee proposal

but shares some strong similarities.

For those artworks a hand crank or a push button activates a familiar, mechanical object, such as a windshield wiper, a doorbell, a snow globe or a pinball game before presenting short audio and video works by local artists.

In that case, too, Zweig collaborated with filmmakers, videographers, singers, storytellers and other artists by creating a competition for original works. Nearly 200 pieces, from 30 seconds to three minutes, from comedic to serious, from professional to amateur, are presented as part of the project.

In New York, Zweig created a frieze for a subway station, a place that represents rare moments of pause beneath the hustle and bustle of the city.

More than 2,000 photographs of New Yorkers walking, carrying everything from a sofa to a cello, were used to create silhouetted figures made from steel, marble and slate and embedded into the tile walls.

Real people in real moments were woven together, creating small narratives within the larger piece, across the 1,200-foot platform. It's a perfect setting for these suspended vignettes of people walking dogs, collecting garbage and shopping.

What is meaningful about Zweig's work is the way she defines the "public" in public art. Often, art is considered public simply because it is out where the public is or because the community is given a nominal opportunity for input.

Zweig collaborates with communities to generate content that is by and about that community. And she creates living artworks that transform public spaces into places of engagement, places to meet each other and look at who we are - together.


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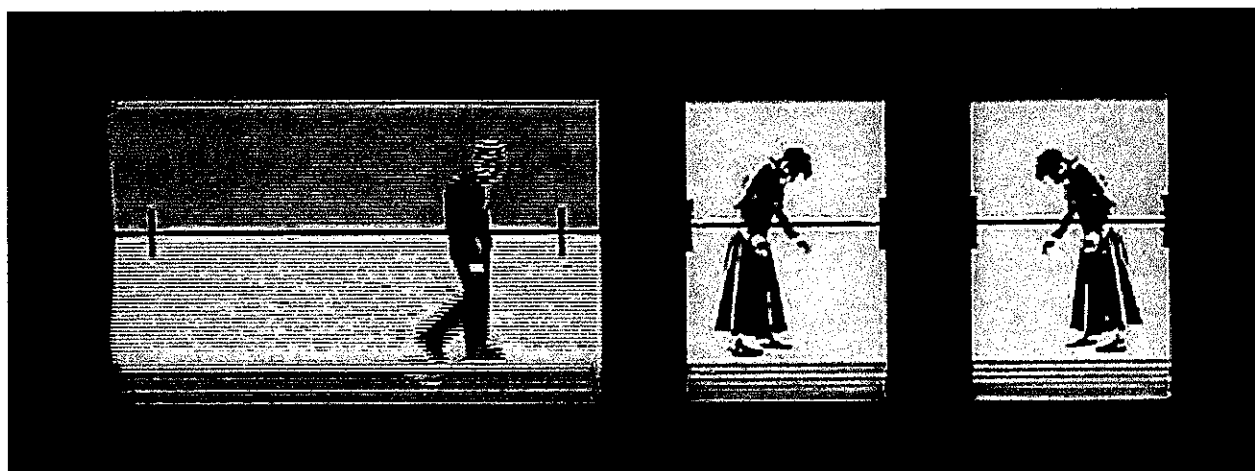
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Milwaukee panel balks at 'old school' public art



Courtesy of Benjamin Cohen and Lynn Paik

Janet Zweig has been experimenting with flap signs, common in train stations until a few decades ago, to create flip-book like animations. This is a still from a prototype of the kind of animation she wants to use. It is not the proposed artwork itself.

By [Mary Louise Schumacher](#) of the Journal Sentinel

Posted: Apr. 1, 2009

A public art project for E. Wisconsin Ave. by nationally known artist Janet Zweig may never get built because members of the Common Council's Public Works Committee disliked the concept and found it too "old school" Wednesday.

"I refuse to have my name attached to something as ridiculous as that," Ald. Bob Donovan said, storming from the room after Bob Bryson of the Department of Public Works showed a video to demonstrate the flip-sign technology, once common in train stations, that would be used for the artworks.

"We are talking about a design that holds us back or indicates that we are stuck in the past," said vice chairman Ald. Joe Dudzik, referring to the old-fashioned signs that Zweig uses to create short animations.

"I am just not feeling it," said Ald. Willie Wade. "But then I wouldn't pay 50 cents for the Mona Lisa."

The committee decided to put the matter on hold so a public hearing could be scheduled, but that could effectively cancel the project because manufacturing was slated to begin in mid-April, when a fabrication bill of \$25,000 also comes due, Zweig said.

"Had forces been mustered to advocate and promote the concept of public art, you might have moved enough people," said committee chairman Bob Bauman. "But the room was empty."

About 80% of the nearly \$300,000 project is funded by the U.S. Department of Transportation, while Milwaukee will cover 20%. The funding has already been approved, which means the city saves no money by putting the kibosh on Zweig's plan. According to the contract with Zweig, the city can only demand that the Brooklyn-based artist come up with another proposal.

Zweig has been working on the project for nearly three years, making regular progress reports to an advisory committee formed by the Common Council and made up of business leaders, city officials and art experts. That group unanimously approved the design last week.

"A lot of work has gone into this," said Zweig, who is currently working on public art projects in other U.S. cities, including Seattle, Pittsburgh, Orlando and Queens, N.Y. "I've never had a reaction like this before, not ever."

Zweig was born in Milwaukee and wanted to use the flip signs here because she loves them so much. She wished she'd been at the meeting to present her own ideas.

"Every time I've personally presented this concept, people have loved it," said Zweig, who watched the meeting live via webcast from her Brooklyn studio.

Previous controversies

Familiar with Milwaukee's public art controversies, including Dennis Oppenheim's terminated "Blue Shirt," Jin Soo Kim's highly criticized "Stratiformis" in the Third Ward, the proposed Lady Elgin Memorial and the oft-bemoaned orange Di Suvero sculpture at the eastern end of Wisconsin Ave., Zweig designed something she considered more intimate and interactive, hoping to engage and attract people on the street.

Zweig's concept is to create flip book-like animations of encounters between Milwaukeeans that would be tucked inside kiosks attached to light poles along E. Wisconsin Ave., in front of Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance Co. Artists and writers would help her come up with the ideas, and then she'd pay local actors, dancers and filmmakers to shoot short films based on the concepts. Each film would then be converted to 80 still images and silk-screened onto the individual flaps.

A trio of animations would be mixed and matched inside each of the five kiosks, and the overall experience is meant to be episodic, as people move from one artwork to another.

Given Mayor Tom Barrett's recent suggestion that between 1,000 and 1,400 jobs might need to be cut from the budget over the next two to four years, Dudzik said he sees benefits in holding up the project, regardless of the terms of the contract.

"If I have the ability to yank the funding from a given project and it would ultimately save tax dollars, I believe that would be within my purview," said Dudzik, adding that he'd like to see if there's a possibility that both the local and federal funds somehow could be "rolled back into" government

services.

Bauman said that the public art project could be taken up again before the full council on April 14 or go back to the Public Works Committee for a public hearing on April 22.

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