

Art is All Around You
Tape 15

MC: **15:00:26** I'm Mel Chin and I'm a conceptual artist.

I: Mel, how would you define public art?

MC: Well – hold on. [Noisy background]

I: Mel, how would you define public art?

MC: **00:42** I would define public art as an opportunity. It's an opportunity to do things that the artist does not have when he works privately in the studio. I would define it as something beyond – something that occurs in the presence of people because it is something that occurs without label. It can be anonymous. It's something that is an aberration to begin with. Yet, it's been with humanity since the very beginning. It's just driven by different purposes.

I: Why do you think that – [Noisy background] Why do you think that public art is important ...?

MC: **01:38** Well, I don't know if public art is important, but it seems to have longevity. It just is a more mutative kind of condition. It kinda defines how people may be thinking at a certain period. It probably sometimes – and I only say sometimes – can display the truth about things maybe in another way. **02:07** In other words, I don't believe in the absolute truth but perhaps it kind of opens up the picture just one more step.

I: What role does the public play in terms of in the process of completing the art?

MC: **02:21** Well, the public has a process in terms of completing art and I guess that go way back into earlier definitions of any art where it's the artist, the object, and the audience. **02:35** Sometimes, you can take that as – in fact that was Beauchamp's talk at the Museum of Fine Arts – I believe – in the 50s under Sweeney where he described the creative act is that maybe we – we will throw out the word public and throw out the word art and maybe just discuss the creative act and what it consists – what constitutes that. **02:55** So, the public has a role in all aspects when it's put in – before them. So –

I: Can you tell me about the Seven Wonders?

MC: Yeah.

I: What are they?

MC: Oh, the Seven Wonders. [laugh]. Yeah, that's a response of the public.

I: [laughs]

MC: **03:15** Oh yeah, the Seven Wonders project came about when I was invited in a national competition to come home again to Houston and present something for the 150th Anniversary of the founding of the state of Texas and the city of Houston. I think it was founded in 1836, and this is almost 10 years later but they were coming around finally making a public gesture to celebrate that in this part. **03:40** The desire was to have seven monumental structures that convey heroic ideas of manufacturing, technology, agriculture – the things they said that the founding fathers had created that made this city great. Seven Wonders came about when I – my cynicism was immediate – what is so heroic about those things – and my immediate gesture was to totally perforate those ideas – to shoot 'em full of holes as I described and it's – those aren't worth my highfaluting ideas about what heroic might be. **04:24** Well, there are high ... ideas about heroism that I didn't think were well placed, but Seven Wonders came about when I began a self-critical examination of my own statements and what is heroic if not that – and the one thing that might have been missing in the list was education and then if not just the education of others but of myself – you know – how will that be? **04:51** So I had to look back into what it could be, and Seven Wonders is actually an exercise in how I as an artist could be invited to do a project so I can only use all my energy to create a platform for the voice of others 'cause I felt something democratic would be ideal – something that would – would permanently articulate the imagination of others rather than just my mind might be appropriate and something that would permanentize the imagination of kids born in the year of the sesquicentennial. **05:29** Because there is a preoccupation what children are – to decorate, to be impermanent, and I felt it was an excellent opportunity for a city to celebrate the future citizens or the – of it's city. The future makers of the city – right now. Don't wait. Do it now. **05:51** So that's how it came about and so if we look at the towers, it's not my piece. I'm only one factor. It's 1,050 other voices that constitutes something that I felt might be of wonder.

I: Tell me how it – what you did? How you had contacts and all that?

MC: **06:13** The – I went back to what I was most engaged as a child, and I remember that the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo, and they had an art exhibition and when you're talented and you're young but you're also isolated in the Kashmere Gardens, you might not know there's a whole city around you but that really opened my – my eyes to a world of talent all over the place. **06:40** And in other words, through an art exhibition – though a competition – a citywide competition, I was liberated from my own delusions about how special I might be, and so I used that kind of format to take those ideas seriously – manufacturing, agriculture, economics, technology, energy – and gave those concepts to

the Houston Independent School District to wage competition for them to illustrate those notions – for children to illustrate those notions, and then my role was to figure out the technical and the formal aspects of – yeah. **07:29** My role was to articulate or do the technical and formal aspects to realize that. So, it's a long answer but – but it's like – let's then make something heroic out of it.

I: What do you think of the finished product now?

MC: **07:45** Well, I – you know – I just spoke with someone. What I think about the finished product is that they might be unfinished stuff that a child that might have been participated in its conception – how they might feel 50 years from now to be part of something back then and how they might feel about a city that allowed them to do that. **08:11** All will be forgotten hopefully and that's the way it should be, and what remains is an idea. An idea of how you might've participated into something that I was only ... in one aspect of it and that's – that's how I see it.

I: Any challenges that you faced while putting that together in a selection and the actual creation process?

MC: **08:32** Oh yes, there are many. The original concept of the design was needed and enhanced by work with the architect and really brainstorming a method to create this unfolding aspect and that was very important – to have some creative interaction just for the designers of the park to integrate and – especially since you come with this aggressive attitude to – you know – shoot it up – you know. **08:58** So that was one aspect. Then, the technical aspect was to make something that is large, and then to realize all the individual laser-cut stainless panels and to find a company. We found a company locally that was willing to engage in something that was not a lucrative enterprise, to do individual cuttings, and they worked night and day to do that. **09:22** So, things like that were the challenges of how to meet – there are always challenges underneath probably large public art project to meet a budget that is set. So ultimately, you have to just forget about it to – in order to get the job done. **09:39** But the – the engineering as well and also having help from the cultural – I think Arts Council of Houston – that helped launched the citywide competition. Like my feeling was – how can I really engage in a competition that would give everyone a chance to participate, and then the hardest job was to chose the 1,050 that would be the result.

I: Can you talk a little bit about that?

MC: Yeah, some of the – you know – there – that's sort of a hard part if you say – [pause]

I: Okay.

MC: **10:21** So, you were asking me – let’s see. Well, the most difficult part of creating a project of this nature was the selection. The selection of who would be represented to in the Seven Wonders out of the thousands that came in – to select 1,050 that would be the one, and the frustration was it boiled down to more how to realize that this is in two-dimensional stencils ‘cause – because the imagination of the kids – of these ideas that came in were profound and some are just unrealizable as stencil. **10:59** And so, if we can think about the imagination as being the more reconstructive aspect in the world torn apart by all kinds of things, then even imagine how I was failing to see tremendous outreaches of thought that came from 12-year-old and 10-year-old kids and not being able to put them on the Seven Wonders.

I: Right. What sort of things do you [inaudible]?

MC: **11:26** Well, they were just – sometimes it would be a portrait of a technology that was impossible or sometimes it was a description of an animal done in such darks tones that there is no line to it, and I thought they were fantastic drawings. **11:49** We did catalyze all the drawings that were there but – you know – my memory of all of those is like – it was almost like the overwhelming amount that came in and that was more like it.

I: Any funny stories about any of the pictures or anything unusual?

MC: **12:07** Well, it’s more – it’s not – well, it’s like maybe the expected and unexpected results to have a child’s appreciation of technology come from the more obvious computer or CPU to another child’s illustration of a butt warmer in a stadium as the pinnacle of technological achievement. So –

I: [Noisy background]. You want to say that last stuff? That was really great when you said it [inaudible]

MC: Oh yeah. That was also a technological achievement.

I: [laugh]

MC: **12:43** Yeah. You know, as far as the pieces I remember that it’s not one that was over another. As usual, it’s the comparison of one to another and in the technological section you would have a project that would be – well obvious CPU and screen, but another kid’s idea of the pinnacle of technological achievement would be a stadium butt warmer, and that was beautiful.

I: Okay. Where is the butt warmer? Do you know where it is ...?

MC: **13:16** Oh no! You have to find it for yourself and if you want to get one, I think you have to go to one of the sporting events in town.

I: Okay. Now, when you – [inaudible] Seven Wonders?

MC: **13:29** You know something – it – I guess public art is not so much about achieving what I want to feel. **13:38** It's almost like – if I feel that human enterprise of a city or just of their neighborhood is comprised of tremendous diversity, then it's – if anything – it's a reminder that it truly is and that you could listen to others beyond yourself and ... have a more enriched life.

I: Anything else now you want to tell me about the Seven Towers – Seven Wonders that I haven't asked you?

MC: **14:09** Not too much, I guess. I'm just – was happy to have engaged in building this piece – of being part of building this piece with 1,050 other young artists. It makes me feel not alone.

I: Any [inaudible]. [laugh] Do you mind saying that last part [inaudible]?

MC: Yeah.

Crew: It looked good though. We might be able to use that. I just want to make sure.

I: Okay.

MC: **14:33** Well, I guess the most important aspect of the Seven Wonders is confirmation that I, as an artist, am not alone. That here's a project that I was able to achieve because I had 1,050 other individuals helping me.

I: Wonderful! Thank you so much.

MC: All right. Did you hear that?

I: Yep.

Crew: Sorry about all the interruptions.

MC: [inaudible]

Crew: We usually don't do that.

[Break in Tape]

PH: I think we should bomb the White House. [Noisy background]

I: [laugh]. So – what is – how would you define public art?

PH: Ahem. I don't have to look at the camera, do I?

I: [inaudible] Yeah.

PH: Okay. **15:24:28** Public art is anything that artists do that the general population has access to. Art is a process of making things, of designing things, of looking at things, and changing our awareness and anything that an individual can do or teams of people can do that help people alter their perception a little bit, learn something different about their city, their place, themselves. **24:55** I'd say that's public art.

I: Where are we [inaudible]?

PH: **25:02** This is Market Square Park. On one of the plaques, there is a reproduction of a sketch that was done by the surveyors when they plotted the city of Houston. When those New York developers came down to sell off squares of land, they designated equal distance from Main Street two plots of lands. **25:21** One was the county government and one was the city government, and this was the site for the city hall, so it was supposed to be a very important place and as it always happens, commerce and government joined together and so on the ground floor was the Market House where you came to buy your food, your vegetables, your butcher shop, all that stuff and then upstairs was where the city government operated. **25:46** And represented in the panels are the four different buildings that occupied this site over the 100 years or more than that –

I: That's okay. [inaudible]

PH: It's been awhile since I did this project.

I: [laugh]

PH: **26:09** I think the most revealing photograph that shows change, which is what I was interested in in doing the park was to show how it had changed – is the first group or

photographs – two photographs that were made: The first one was made in the 1920s from the roof of the Rice Hotel and this – you could tell – was the center of the city. **26:27** There was incredible amount of activity. There weren't vacant lots. There was no surface parking garages. No parking lots. This was downtown. **26:38** And then it's compared to the photograph that my wife and I went back to photograph on that same spot in the Rice Hotel and it looks like a bomb hit it – you know – it was just decimated and this was early before the revival of downtown and things started coming back and businesses were moving here and people were living downtown, and it's desolate.

I: Okay. What did you – what did you really [inaudible]?

PH: **27:05** Caroline Huber was co-directors with Michael Peranteau at DiverseWorks, which had their location just around the corner on Travis, and they decided that the park needed some improving. **27:16** They had access to applying for grants from the National Endowment for the Arts back when the federal government was allowed to support the arts a little more actively. The park that was here had been the cutting edge design. Much earlier, it looked like it was a burial ground for elephants. There were all these worms, and people didn't feel like it was safe. **27:46** You could – people could come in the middle – camp out in the middle and not be seen from the street. So the goal was to change the security of the park and make it a useful park, and DiverseWorks secured the grant from the NEA to invite five different artist to collaborate, to design the park, do individual pieces of art in the park, work together to make it a place for people – that people would come in. **28:17** Richard Turner, an artist from Southern California, worked on the pinwheel design so that the entrances came from the corners so you could cut diagonally across the park. We worked for a couple of years. Some people worked really hard to raise money. We – we fought about that it was going to be. **28:31** It was a real democratic, messy, collaborative argument and Walter Hopps – Caroline's husband – called me up and said, "Well, how would you put photographs outside in the park?" And I had just finished working on a project for the public library photographing cemeteries, and a lot of cemeteries have little portraits – oval portraits. So I gave a call – that cloud caught us, didn't it ...? [noise] Okay? **29:10** Okay. So I did some investigation. I called a couple of local cemeteries and said, "Where do you get your porcelain-enamel panels? I talked to a company in Illinois, but they're quality wasn't very good, and it was as much hand-worked as it was a photographic reproduction and eventually, I found my way to a company in the northwest that did these beautiful reproductions where they – these are glass – like your stove. **29:36** They silkscreen minerals onto the photograph, and then bake it at incredible degrees so that it's impervious to fading. If somebody spray paints on it, you can wipe it off. It's not – it can't repel glass bottles thrown against it so we've had some problem with vandalism.

I: Tell me about how you decided – can you actually talk about some of different pieces that are here around the park?

PH: **30:08** Well, the centerpiece is James Surls' tree or flower. It always sorta looks like a tornado to me, but James felt that it would bring people's eyes up and lead them up into the city, and it would be a hopeful visionary piece. **30:27** Richard Turner collected – with a help from a lot of people – collected fragments of buildings that were being torn down around the city and arranged those in patterns throughout the sidewalks and those sidewalls that you come in and my wife, Lisa Hardaway, and I really initially hoped to offer that wondering feeling that we have when we go into archives of old photographs – a sense of discovery – that we wanted to have photographs scattered out throughout the park that you would come across one as if someone had dropped it – that it had fallen out of somebody's scrapbook. **31:08** So it looks like a gallery and more like a process of discovering things, but the legal counsel said that somebody could slip and fall so we couldn't put them flat. We needed to put them on the backs. And so Richard designed these bench and we put the stainless steel frame and inserted the panels here, and it's designed in a way that each of the four benches has a theme. **31:40** This is a specific history of this site – the buildings that were here, the changes it went on as civic leaders would try to change it. At one point, it was – there was – we found some articles on the news – old newspaper archives – where they were going to put a parking lot here. They called it a park, but it was going to be a parking lot, and the variety of things that happened. **32:02** And then on the other side, it's businesses of Houston, different activities, locations around here that I've photographed here about 15 years before just on my own, looking around, photographing signs. A lot of those buildings were already gone. [Pause] What?

I: [inaudible]. Keep going.

PH: All right. [inaudible] pointing at the camera. **32:25** That's the architectural history – where we found old photographs of certain sites and sometimes the same – a different photographer had gone back and done a rephotographic project of – so we could add a third or fourth layer of time so you could see a variety of them – of changes that had happened over time and then this one is mostly portraits of people that Metropolitan Research Center at the Houston Public Library has an incredible collection of photographs. **32:54** So we were – they were very generous with providing pictures to be put on this public place. It would show the variety – the diversity of the city – the age and ordinary activities, not just the CEOs and the mayors, but people having barbecues or picnics, birthday parties –

I: What did you ... was accomplished [inaudible]?

PH: **33:37** I wanted to get people to look at the city. [coughs] I forgot to wear white pants. I forgot about the pants. I should've worn my blue jeans.

I: That's okay. Normally, we only shoot from here up, but I think [inaudible]

PH: He is quick. He responds to what's happening. [Noisy background]

Crew: Would you mind letting us see some of your shots ...? I mean, if you would like e-mail us some of those stuff?

PH: Oh sure!

Crew: ...

PH: Yeah. Everybody likes pictures of themselves.

Crew: [laughs] Thanks [inaudible].

PH: [laughs] **34:26** Well, my hope was to make the history visible. We've had the problem in Houston of tearing down so many of the buildings. It's a sad comment that the only way we were able to put architectural history here was through fragments of torn down buildings, but the photographs show the building's whole. **34:47** On one side, there's a funeral marching down Preston Avenue – you know – it's people walking in the street, all kinds of things. On one side, there's a photograph of a – I've lost the word – one of the theaters when it was here before there was movies. What were those called?

Crew: Vaudeville?

PH: Vaudeville. Thank you

I: Can you actually start – start right over with that part about one side –

PH: Okay. **35:15** On one side – what? [laughs] Oh on one side, there is a photograph of a guy performing outside one of the theaters where it was in the process of – they would have movies but it was originally vaudeville. So this guy would come into vaudeville between – between the films, and he is hanging upside down in bag [inaudible] “my country chooses thee” upside down on the side of the building two stories up. **35:42** It's a publicity stunt, and there's a photograph and it was dated so we go to the archives of the paper and we find a write-up about who the guy was, what he was doing, and why it was, where it was – all that stuff. **35:54** So it's kind of a research project of finding anecdotal forgotten history and say, “Oh look at all we have forgotten – buildings, people, their

dogs, the changes.” and they had their own layer of what’s happening right now. As I try to convince my photography students is that you can only take a photograph right now and right now is everything you take for granted is gonna change and of course, if you’re 20 years old, you think that. **36:24** You think that it’s gonna be forever. So you got to take the picture now and then it’ll become more important as he grows – as he gets older. And – and I look at some of these and I think it’s time to go back and do a third layer or a fourth layer.

I: Why is that possible?

PH: **36:40** Because Houston changes so quickly. Houston changes so quickly. Maybe it just seems to change more now that we’re older, I mean, I’m older – Now that I’m older.

I: Tell me about the fountain and Malou Flato.

PH: **36:58** Malou Flato is this wonderful artist. She was in Austin at that time. I think now she spends most of her time in Montana, and her ability to add color to the park to make it have those flowers and displays of food that the original market had. You can imagine what this place was. You can imagine how noisy this place was with double buses coming down – how amazingly noisy this place was. **37:32** On one side, there’s a description from Harper’s in the 18-somethings of a writer. He came through and has a verbal description – a written description of what it was like being in the marketplace that day. **37:48** And so Malou’s watercolors on tile add a sense of the vibrancy that was really here then and that it wasn’t all just in black and white and to make these benches and try to relate it to the street so that there’s the inside and the outside on the benches, so you can sit and look at those activity going by. You can sit on the inside and have the quieter part of the park.

I: Anything else, Paul, that you would like to add that I might not have asked you? Any funny stories or any ... to say or something?

PH: Too early in the morning, I guess.

I: Let us go back to the way you [inaudible].

PH: **38:48** I’d like people, just like this gentleman who walked through, this gentleman over here who’s sitting and reading – people to slow down, sit here, look up at James’ piece, see the tall buildings, look here and see what was here before, maybe learn to value what we have, value what we lost, try to hold on to a little bit more of what’s important. **39:27** If I could read one of these, there’s a – there’s a terrific quote – I’ll come back though.

[Pause] “Memory believes before knowing remembers. Believes longer than recollects, longer than knowing even wonders.” by William Faulkner.

I: What – what holds true about that? [inaudible]

PH: **39:57** The dissonance between remembering and knowing, between knowledge and certainty, and the way memories bubble up and come to us when we least expect it.

I: What do you mean [inaudible]?

PH: Can I explain that?

I: Yeah. [Pause] Why did you – you don’t have to explain it. ... why did you put that quote in there? Why would ...? What did you like about it?

PH: **40:37** It’s been 15 years. I have to dig back a minute – like my memory is not as good.

I: [laughs]

Crew: [inaudible] [laughs]

PH: [laughs] **40:49** The first time I got interviewed on television was when I was a student at Rice. I’d edited the yearbook and the previous editors had put in – well they came and interviewed me. [laughs]

I: [laughs] That must’ve been like the way [inaudible].

PH: Well, no.

I: No?

PH: No.

[End of Tape]