

Art is All Around You
Tape #6

- A: **06:08:41** The public can play a number of roles in a public art project. Often, it depends on the government or the entity that is commissioning the artwork and the artist involved. Some artists reach out to the public in a very aggressive way to gauge their interests, enthusiasms and even sometimes their own art expressions to put back into the piece. **09:08** The public can be involved through an approval process. The public can be involved through an approval process for artwork, reviewing designs, schemes, sketches, meeting with the artists, giving input to an artist for the artist to use in the creation of the piece.
- I: What went on in the actual viewing of the piece? What will – do they play in completing that process?
- A: **09:40** In viewing and interacting with the artwork, many things are often kinetic or tell a story, and it's the people and the viewers and the public that complete the story for the art piece.
- I: What do you mean that the [inaudible]?
- A: **09:59** I think that a lot of artists give us visual clues in the works that they put out there, and they rely on the individual experiences of the public to draw something from those clues, and it's often less important that we get from the art work what the artist intended, as long as we get something and take it away and create a story of our own and we go out and we tell other people, and then they go down and they participate and interact with the piece in their own way.
- I: How do you cite where the part was played? That's another question that I have.
- A: **10:36** In different projects, there'll often be a major element, the purpose of the project. The artist will look at design schemes, these suggestions of an architect or a landscape architect to understand where the major gathering places might be or what areas are needing some additional help in adornment, dressing up sometimes. And each artist construe with their priorities, for how they want their expression and the expression of the piece to work. **11:11** In Sesquicentennial Park, the towers are very, very prominent, and Mel Chin took those towers as a way to integrate Houston's school children into this major and public statement.
- I: Since you brought that up, [inaudible].
- A: Okay.
- I: – in the art, let's talk about it.

A: **11:32** It's hard for me to talk about them without like citing specific pieces.

I: That's okay.

A: Okay.

I: No, that's fine. There is nothing wrong with that. Tell me about the Seven Wonders.

A: **11:42** The Seven Wonders project is part of the Sesquicentennial Park in downtown Houston. It was originally conceived of for Houston sesquicentennial, and is three capital projects on top of each other. The idea of having public artwork was part of the original concept, and after many, many years of fundraising effort and development efforts, it went away for a while. It came back. **12:10** Thanks to the effort of Guy Hagstette, Central Houston and the downtown district to become a prominent element. Mel Chin was one of a number of artists who were invited to make proposals for the park and The Seven Wonders towers had themes. **12:28** Before they were called The Seven Wonders, they were towers that had themes of the city. Houston is a city of energy. Houston is a city of technology. Houston is a city of agriculture, and so on, and Mel thought it would be a fantastic way to celebrate the actual sesquicentennial by involving children who were born in the year of the sesquicentennial, which Houston shares with the state, the year of the sesquicentennial, and get their drawings as expressions of their view of their city through these themes. **13:02** So 1050 original children's drawings were selected from several school districts to be translated into stencils, and ultimately laser-cut into stainless steel panels, and put onto the pillars as The Seven Wonders.

I: What do you think that's interesting of about that thing?

A: **13:26** A number of things. The park's construction was happening a number of years after the actual sesquicentennial, and a lot of people thought that this was a public relations problem. And I think Mel's genius was involving children born in the year of the sesquicentennial and thinking that's gonna be a challenge in turning them into an opportunity to get their visions for the city. **13:51** It's a very creative age that sort of 10-year-old age and the participation of the students is something that will stay with them and their families for the rest of their lives, and people will return to the site to see the towers and continue to participate in the city.

I: And also to me, it struck me that – that those pieces talk to you on two different levels ... You appreciate them far away in one way and then close up in another, do you know what I mean?

A: **14:20** Absolutely. Mel's idea from the beginning was that at a distance, they looked like giant lanterns, so they have a very large impact, a big city, a big part of the skyline impact but on a closer inspection, there'll be this discovery of, "Oh, my goodness. **14:36** There's a little train or there's some corn, or there's a rocket ship," and be able to pick a part, the small pieces, and find out the meaning of the towers.

I: Any interesting stories or funny stories surrounding those structures that you can think of?

A: **15:00** I think that one of my favorite stories – for me just viewing all of the drawings and how children in their unedited enthusiasm for the themes came out with these really honest expressions, and the idea of invention and technology was one of the themes, and the students proposed an invention for the future that was a butt-warmer, and we have a lot of discussion about where could this butt-warmer have come from, and it's in there. It's in one of the towers.

I: Which tower is it in?

A: **15:41** The technology tower.

I: Anything else you want to say about The Seven Wonders that I might not have asked you?

A: **15:50** One thing that is probably lesser known about the piece is that it was, you know, technically very challenging, and the artists had to work extremely hard, and create a program to be able to execute his idea. **16:07** I think we all went into it, thinking how to scan these drawings and then give it to the machine, and the machine will cut them but the limitations of the machine to be able to read this high-density images was something that had to be overcome, and there was a lot of handwork, meticulous work by all the artists and all of the fabricators to make it come together, and it was the excitement of the fabricators that really helped because they really took it on. **16:37** They wanted this project to be successful because they believe in Mel's vision. They believe in Mel's vision, and the vision of the project.

I: What was Mel's vision in case they never ... what you know?

A: **16:58** Mel is the best person to speak about this work but in talking with him, I came to understand that he's growing up in Houston, participating in a number of juried art shows, student art shows with the rodeo. **17:13** It's a real important part of this Houston culture especially at that age group, and appreciating that

effort and the creativity of the young people of the city and celebrating it in such a large and permanent way for the entire city is some piece of longevity about the charm of that part of your life that will live on forever.

I: [inaudible] the Sesquicentennial Park. Can you tell me about The Big Bubble?

A: **17:45** The Big Bubble is a very different kind of art piece from the Seven Wonders. It's quite. It's hidden. It's a surprise. **17:56** Many people don't what it is, if it's there at all. Dean Ruck created The Big Bubble as a way to interject wonder and curiosity into the bayou environment. It's important for the bayou to be aerated. **18:14** It's actually good for the ecosystem but The Big Bubble, the aeration of the bayou isn't really, as an individual element helping the bayou that much. It was more of the impetus to that way of creative thinking. **18:32** It's like what if. It's a red button that is in the second pillar of the towers on the Preston Street bridge, an unmarked red button that if people have the courage to press it and wonder about it sets off a giant bubble in the bayou below. **18:56** It's extremely fun to be the person that presses the button when someone is walking by at the lower level, not knowing what's happening in the bayou. Is it a large fish or a natural phenomenon? **19:10** And the stories – the I guess rumors that surround The Big Bubble and the giant fish and alligator guard that are living down there have certainly been set off by this piece. **19:25** There are a number of people who make this button part of their bicycling or hiking route in order to be able to press it as they go around town.

I: Tell about some of the funny stories that are surrounding The Big Bubble or the people's reaction of The Big Bubble.

A: **19:49** People have been afraid of the bubble. Actually, I've seen ladies scream and wonder what was making that giant splash. I actually saw someone putting a fishing line as if you could even ever catch whatever would make that big of a splash. **20:07** I received a phone call once from a gentleman who worked in one of the high-rise buildings, and he was – “hey, know you something about that big bubble in the bayou. What is that? I can see that from my office. Tell me what this is all about?” He was – he needed to know because he had seen it and –

I: Did you tell him the truth?

A: **20:28** Of course. I always try to tell the truth. People have worried if canoers will be knocked over. People do – people do invent stories, and there are young people who have created a fan club for the bubble, the Red Button Group.

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