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Facing Skepticism

On August 27, 2005, a stuntman shot out of a cannon in Tijuana. He flew over the Mexico/US border fence, traveled in an arc for fifty meters, and landed in a net on the San Diego side prepared for him by the Venezuelan artist Javier Téllez. Back then, I was the Director of the San Diego Museum of Art (SDMA). I recall being asked by a local television station to explain how this well-publicized project could be understood as art. The “human cannonball” was part of *inSite_05: Art Practices in the Public Domain*, a five-month-long, binational exhibition of site-specific works directed at the region and the artworld beyond. Because SDMA was a partner to *inSite_05*, I agreed to an interview in which I enumerated Téllez’s professional credentials, explained how *One Flew Over the Void (Bala Perdida)*—his work’s formal title—fit into histories of performance and protest art, and spoke earnestly about the inspired programming decisions of *inSite_05*’s curatorial team. In a subsequent broadcast, my too-lengthy commentary was cut extensively, blended with other voices, and spliced into a two-minute blurb that I scarcely recognized, except for the following unmistakable editorial thrust: “these art ‘experts’ are a bunch of assholes.”

Or words to that effect. I have long gotten over my fifteen seconds of shame at the scarcely concealed contempt that stood behind it. What has stayed with me, however, is the challenge that performing something like public art history service for audiences inclined to disinterest represents. Academic privilege shelters us even from our own students’ harshest viewpoints. Communication strategies that both acknowledge skepticism and, more importantly, demonstrate respect for diverging opinions are crucial to good pedagogy, therefore. My students are most alert to complex arguments when they are invited to consider them imaginatively and when their participation intersects with their own lives. The assignments they report enjoying the most tend to ask them to take on specific, practical problems—proposing an acquisition, adding to or subtracting a particular work from an exhibition, pointing out problems with/gaps in archives—and assess the consequences. Such exercises don’t preclude rigorous theoretical approaches; to the contrary, they shine daylight on the available toolboxes and test them out through open dialogue. Similarly, public art history promises to engage new audiences because it is up front about the disciplinary risk it entails.

Classrooms—both virtual and in cement—are, for the time being at least, qualitatively different from the public arenas that concern me most. Academic art history isn’t endangered by the lack of civility, partisanship, anti-intellectualism, or intolerance that define other communication outlets. By entering deliberately into the fray, we should expect to sacrifice control over the terms of our own preferred narratives, as the blast from my own recollected past is meant to suggest here. Today, the case for modeling critical thinking skills while engaging in public sphere cultural debates seems especially worthwhile, and

increasingly doable. By involving all interested audiences in dialogue about what matters most to them, we communicate the highest ambitions for our field.

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Editors' Note: In the fall of 2019, we solicited responses to our Bully Pulpit, "Isn't It Time for Art History to Go Public?" guest-edited by Laura M. Holzman. To see all four responses, please visit <http://editions.lib.umn.edu/panorama/article/talk-back-issue-6-1>. To see the original Bully Pulpit, please visit <https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.2271>.