

To: ARCS Awards Subcommittee.

November 26, 2023

From: Danielle Galván Gomez

Re: 2023 ARCS Conference Session Review

Session: "Responding Creatively to Public Art Theft" by: Dana Murray

At the 2023 Association of Registrar and Collection Specialists Conference in Montreal, Canada, I has the opportunity to attend the session "Responding Creatively to Public Art Theft" by Dana Murray. Murray's presentation focused on a case study of a theft of a bronze public art sculpture, *St. Albert the Great*, from the City of Alberta in Alberta, Canada. As a registrar who works for a public art collection, I was interested and intrigued by this topic, especially since the collection I work for has several bronze sculptures in public parks like the one discussed by Murray. Murray's session delved into several aspects of public art theft, such as why it happens, its impact on communities, how to communicate with artists and the public, and how institutions can respond in creative ways to theft mitigation and response.

Murray began by describing that most thefts are crimes of opportunity or desperation and that there are steps institutions can take to mitigate the risk or help facilitate a quicker response to thefts when they happen. For example, she noted that the way the artwork was installed allowed for thieves to easily cut and weld through the parts of the sculpture inserted into a concrete base, which would have only taken a matter of minutes. Future installation would incorporate a more complex and harder to damage or destroy installation method. In addition, landscaping and low barriers can be erected to make it more difficult to access or back a car up to artworks to steal them, while not limiting public viewing or access. The other thing she noted was the importance of a relationship with staff working on site. For example, in this case study the sculpture had been missing for several days before the City's art staff were aware, but the parks staff did not alert them since they assumed the arts staff had taken it away for maintenance (it was a member of the public that drew attention to the art theft). A clear line of communication between the two staff members, with protocols for sculpture maintenance and emergencies (such as theft) with points of contact identified would go a long way in strengthening staff capacities. One way to implement this is to conduct risk assessments and then implement a protocol to respond to risks per artwork (as well as communicating that to on site staff).

The presentation also focused on how the public responded to the theft of the sculpture and how part of an arts department or staff's responsibility when a theft happens is to communicate and be accountable to the public for their actions taken to respond. This is an important aspect of stewardship for a public art collection and is as important as the concrete steps taken to address the theft (such as retrieval or refabrication/reinstallation). Murray described an initiative undertaken by the City of Alberta art department as well as communications department called "Spruce it Up," which launched recently. The campaign includes a form that is publically available on each artwork's collection page where people can report theft, damage, vandalism, and condition issues. They are also considering implementing an Adopt-An-Artwork program, where individuals or organizations can adopt an artwork and contribute funds to its maintenance and care. Murray underscored that both initiatives show that communication and investment/buy in for artworks is central for proper care and stewardship of public art collections.

This session is highly applicable to my work and I came away from it with several ideas I can bring to my organization. For example, I plan to relaunch our public collections website soon (after moving to a new CMS) and I am considering implementing a public comment or form for the public to report issues or theft of public artwork. I was also fascinated by the discussion of installation methods that can help prevent theft. I think this is something I will want to research more so that I can communicate a strong plan for installation to artist's during the design phase of their artwork proposals (for commissions) or develop a protocol for existing or adopted artworks that we install in the public. I also think that continuing to do community work and outreach around and about public artworks is central to caring for them as well as having the community they exist in care about the artworks. As Murray said we "can help communities by keeping their art safe and cared for!"