

Opinion: Lack of funding for public art no laughing matter



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Published on: July 13, 2017 | Last Updated: July 13, 2017 11:36 AM PDT



Chinese artist Yue Minjun's beloved A-maze-ing Laughter sculpture in the city's West End was only made permanent due to a private donor, while the City of Vancouver provides virtually no funding to the Biennale organization that brought it here. *JENELLE SCHNEIDER / VANCOUVER SUN*

Renowned Chinese artist Yue Minjun makes his first visit to Vancouver this week, marked by Mayor Gregor Robertson proclaiming July 13 the official Day of Laughter in his honour. If you don't recognize his name, you'll surely recognize the face, because it's featured prominently in exaggerated proportions on his sculpture installation of 14 giant laughing men at English Bay.

A-maze-ing Laughter is no doubt one of the most visited and photographed public artworks in the country and has become an iconic image of the city, widely used on everything from tourism promotions to real estate advertising. If you'll forgive the baseball analogy, A-maze-ing Laughter is undeniably a home run.

The sculpture was brought to us by the Vancouver Biennale, another name not widely known, whose work is often mistaken for the city public art program. Far from it, the Biennale is an independent non-profit organization that mounts outdoor exhibitions and is responsible for some of the best and most recognized works of public art in the city. Device To Root Out Evil, better known as the "upside down church," Engagement Rings celebrating same-sex marriage, the mural of Giants on the Granville Island silos, The Meeting of crouching red monks, F Grass by Ai Weiwei and dozens of other museum-calibre works have come to our city as part of Biennale exhibitions. A few have remained permanently thanks to their efforts in finding philanthropists to fund the purchase and subsequent donation of the sculptures to the city, A-maze-ing Laughter being an example of this.

Yet somehow, despite the track record, the organization qualifies for surprisingly negligible funding under various City of Vancouver cultural grant programs. To put it into perspective, in 2016 Cultural Services disbursed more than \$11 million in grants to more than 300 local arts and cultural groups. That same year, city council voted for a Public Art Boost to allocate an additional \$1.5 million over three years specific to public art. No funding of any significance came to the Biennale.

Aside from cultural grants, most of the public art in the city is realized through a program that requires major real estate developers to contribute \$1.98 per build-able square foot to public art through a process managed by the city. There are many examples of wonderful small works that have come as a result of this, but there are many more disappointments. The flaw is in a process that assumes developers actually care about a pesky public art contribution in the grand scheme of their project, and the relatively small budgets per development that their hired art consultants are expected to work within.

Developers have a second option, which is to give their required contribution to the Signature Projects Fund, allowing the city to pool funds and commission more significant artworks for key locations throughout Vancouver. This seems like the more promising opportunity, but the requirement to commission work immediately excludes sculptures like A-maze-ing Laughter from their consideration.

We can debate the merits of the programs and models ad nauseam, but the underlying question remains: Why is it that with all of this opportunity for funding, so much of the public art in this city simply doesn't matter? And why are we so complacent when completely irrelevant artwork passes through the processes at city hall, yet other works beloved by the public are excluded?

When done right, art in public space makes an incredible impact on our city landscape, local economy and community consciousness. It's supposed to be relevant within the context of our social and political discourse. It should disrupt our taken-for-granted assumptions and stereotypes. It invites inquiry and curiosity. It amplifies the best of our values and aspirations. And yes, sometimes great art just makes us happy.

The inspiration for today's official Day of Laughter dates back to 2012, when the donation of A-maze-ing Laughter by Chip and Shannon Wilson to the people of Vancouver happened to coincide with the United Nations passing a resolution declaring "happiness" a fundamental

human goal. The pursuit of happiness was recognized as equally important to our survival as economic and environmental well-being. A-maze-ing Laughter is a work of public art that matters.

Miriam Blume describes herself as an art activator and was responsible for the media campaign resulting in Chip and Shannon Wilson coming forward to donate the \$1.75 million to acquire A-maze-ing Laughter.

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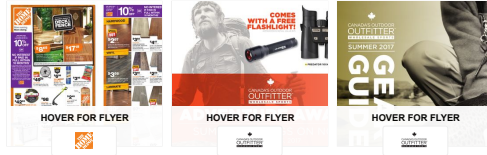
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