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How Public Art Becomes Public: An Integrative Review of Participation, Spatial Governance, and Digital Mediation

Yu Wang*

School of Fine Arts, Shanxi University, Taiyuan, Shanxi, 030006, China

Corresponding author: Yu Wang, wangyu10@sxu.edu.cn

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Abstract: The location of an artwork in an open setting does not, by itself, make the work public in a political or social sense. Studies in public art, urban geography, participatory practice, memory, and digital media describe a less direct relationship between visibility and public agency. This integrative review asks how participation, spatial governance, cultural memory, and digital mediation shape that relationship. Seven topic searches of Crossref metadata were conducted on 9 October 2026. After 689 deduplicated records had been screened by title, abstract, source, and relevance, 65 were retained in an evidence table and ten core texts were read in full. Across this literature, publicness appears as an outcome of negotiated relationships, not an inherent quality of a site or object. The review organizes these relationships into six areas: access, authorship, decision power, stewardship, memory, and the governance of media and data. The studies also show why visible interaction can be misleading. A project may invite contributions while leaving its agenda, resources, or digital infrastructure under institutional control. Disagreement can reveal neglected interests, although its democratic value depends on whether institutions provide transparent procedures and respond to those affected. The six areas offered here are intended to guide interpretation; they have not been validated as a measurement scale. The review is also limited by its single metadata source, one-reviewer screening, and selective full-text reading. It therefore offers a traceable critical synthesis, not exhaustive coverage or an estimate of causal effects.

Keywords: Public Art; Publicness; Public Participation; Spatial Governance; Cultural Memory; Digital Mediation; Co-Creation

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1. Introduction

Public art occupies an unstable position between object, site, institution, and public process. A sculpture may be publicly funded yet inaccessible in practice; a temporary installation may be physically open yet institutionally controlled; a community mural may invite labor without sharing authorship; and an interactive screen may collect public input while leaving its rules, data, and outputs beyond public control. The recurring error is to infer publicness from visibility. The literature instead asks who defines the issue, who can enter and remain, whose knowledge counts, who can alter the work, who controls resources and maintenance, and who can challenge the result.

This distinction has practical consequences. Public art has long been assigned ambitious benefits, including place identity, civic pride, social inclusion, education, economic revitalization, and democratic dialogue. Hall and Robertson showed that

such claims often exceeded the quality of evaluation supporting them [1]. Later work similarly described a "public artopia" in which generalized benefits were detached from actors, geography, and project time [3]. Studies of social inclusion demonstrate that art can operate as both contributor to and critique of urban restructuring; outcomes depend substantially on the process through which work enters the urban fabric [2]. Public reception research further shows that "the public" is heterogeneous: familiarity, education, proximity, perceived appropriateness, sociability, and meaningfulness shape different responses to the same work and site [5].

In this review, publicness is treated as a problem to be investigated rather than a status conferred by the label "public art." The central question is how participatory, spatial, institutional, memorial, and mediated conditions affect the making of a public. The discussion follows three related problems. One concerns the allocation of voice, authorship, resources, and authority during a project. Another concerns the way ownership, regulation, maintenance, and memory influence the work after installation. The final problem arises when digital systems mediate participation: their capacity to extend agency must be distinguished from the appearance of participation created by an interface.

This focus differentiates the review from adjacent accounts of aesthetic response. It does not ask how formal regularities, processing fluency, expertise, or situated valuation explain liking. Instead, it examines the production and contestation of publics around artworks and art processes. Aesthetic experience remains relevant, but it is only one component of a broader institutional and political ecology.

2. Review Approach and Evidence Boundaries

2.1 Search and Selection

An integrative design was used because the question cuts across art theory, geography, urban studies, planning, education, memory studies, and media studies. Conceptual arguments were read alongside empirical cases and methodological papers. The resulting comparison is critical and interpretive; no pooled effect size was sought.

On 9 October 2026, seven English-language topic strings were queried through the Crossref works API: "public art participation publicness," "public art spatial governance public space," "participatory art community regeneration," "public art placemaking social inclusion," "digital public art interaction participation," "public monuments cultural memory contestation," and "socially engaged art publics space." The date boundary was 1990 to 9 October 2026. The harvest yielded 689 deduplicated candidate records. Screening considered title relevance, abstract or publisher description, disciplinary fit, source traceability, and contribution to at least one of four initial domains: participation, spatial governance, memory, or digital mediation. Sixty-five articles or chapters were retained. Ten high-relevance texts were read in full; the remainder were used only at the verified metadata, abstract, or relevant-section level recorded in the evidence table.

The procedure falls short of a systematic review. Only one metadata service was searched, screening was undertaken by one reviewer, and selection followed a purposive theoretical logic. The counts are reported so that the route from search to synthesis can be followed; they should not be read as a PRISMA claim. Important books entered the interpretation through the reviewed scholarship, while the evidence table favored records with a DOI or stable publisher metadata. This choice improved traceability but may have amplified language, regional, disciplinary, and indexing biases.

2.2 Coding and Synthesis

The coding questions were derived iteratively from the core readings. For each source, the review recorded the public-art form, site, participating actors, participation stage, claimed decision rights, governance arrangement, temporal horizon, evidence type, principal contribution, and stated limitation. A claim was treated as stronger when the study documented how participants could change an agenda, allocation, design, rule, or afterlife, rather than simply recording attendance, interaction, or approval.

The synthesis compares claims at three levels. The project level concerns encounters, authorship, and design choices. The institutional level concerns commissioning, funding, permissions, evaluation, and maintenance. The infrastructural level concerns property regimes, platform protocols, archives, data, and public-space regulation. Figure 1 maps the main traditions and their unresolved gaps. Figure 2 documents the actual review workflow and separates completed synthesis from inference boundaries.

Figure 1. Prior research pathways, recurrent gaps, and the review's six-dimensional synthesis. Gray summarizes prior pathways; blue marks the present synthesis; orange marks unresolved gaps. Citation ranges correspond to the numbered reference list.

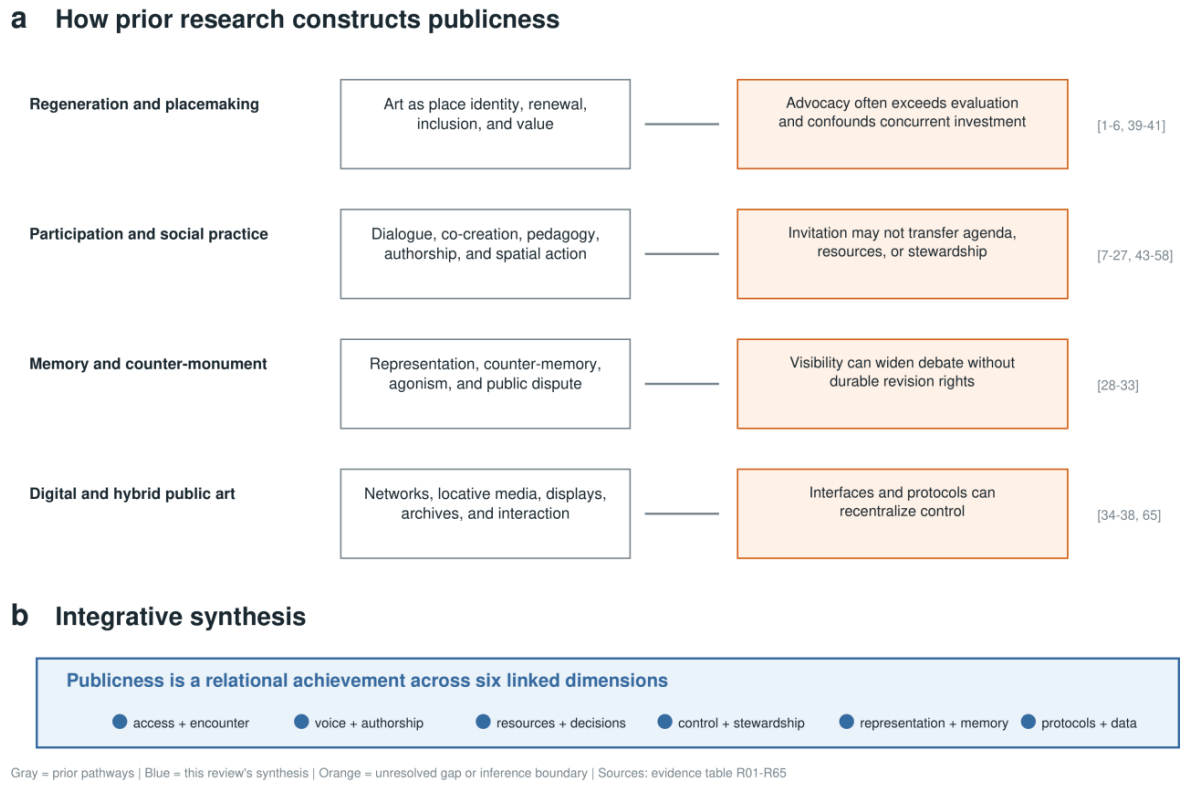
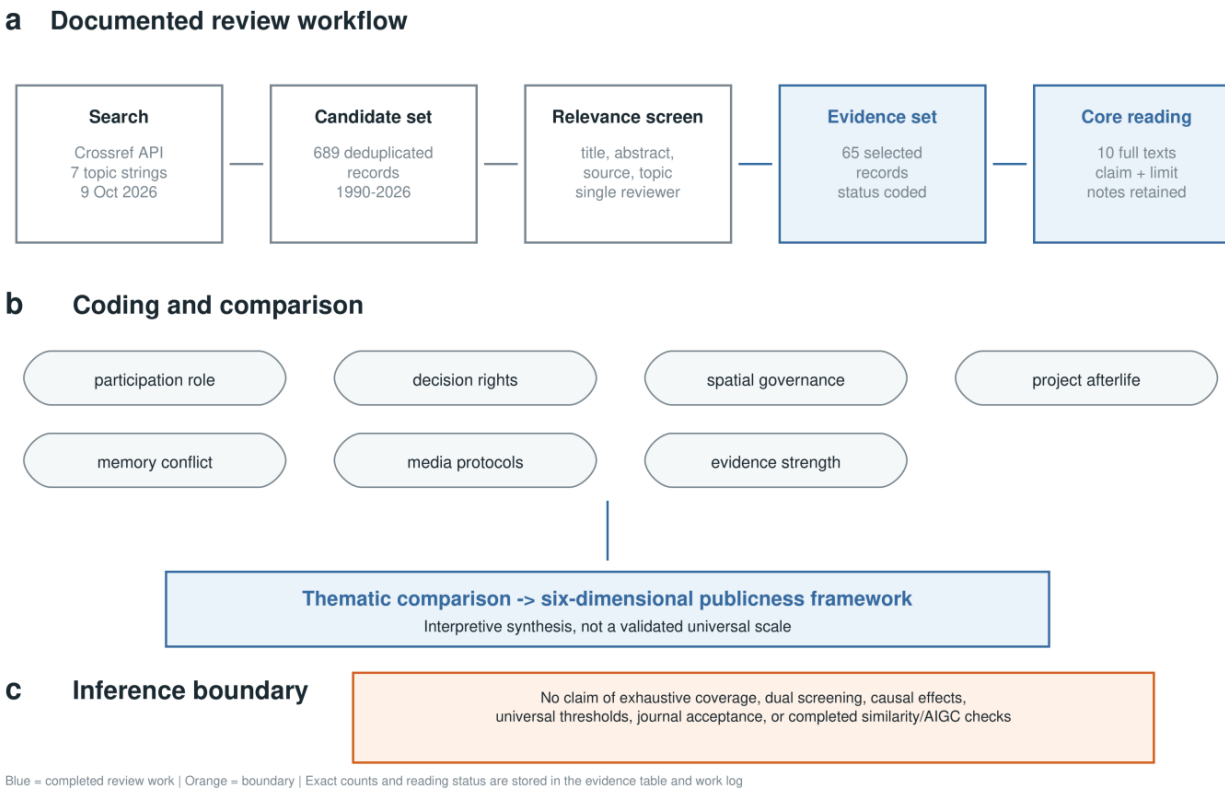


Figure 2. Documented search, screening, reading, coding, and synthesis workflow. Counts describe this review only. The orange panel states the inference boundary and prevents the workflow from being mistaken for a systematic-review or submission claim.



3. From Access to Publicness

3.1 Public Location Is Not Public Power

Public space literature has repeatedly questioned narratives of simple decline or simple openness. Contemporary spaces are produced through mixed public and private arrangements, and their public character varies with access, control, accountability, use, and social meaning [59,62]. Arnstein's participation ladder remains useful not as a universal scoring device but as a warning that consultation may occur without redistribution of power [60]. Fraser's account of multiple publics and counterpublics likewise unsettles the fiction of a single neutral public sphere [63].

These insights matter because public art often inherits the contradictions of its site. Commissioning may be public while procurement is opaque. Access may be nominal while surveillance, policing, disability barriers, operating hours, or informal norms exclude particular users. Maintenance may preserve an object while eliminating unplanned uses. Conversely, a privately managed site may support meaningful public encounters when rights, responsibilities, and redress are explicit. The appropriate question is therefore not "Is the artwork in public?" but "Which forms of public action does the artwork and its governance make possible, for whom, and over what duration?"

Empirical public-art research reinforces this distinction. Zebracki and colleagues found that claims about physical, economic, social, and symbolic effects were situated in actor roles, place, and project phase [3]. Research centered on public perceptions found that appropriateness, sociability, meaningfulness, familiarity, and proximity shaped reception [5]. Expert discussions likewise showed that art, public space, and audience are negotiated across scales rather than joined automatically by co-location [6]. Public art at documenta 14 could function as stage, public sphere, or alternative commons, but these modes distributed agency differently and did not necessarily persist after the event [15].

The first conclusion is thus negative but productive: visibility is not evidence of publicness. Visibility identifies an opportunity for encounter. Publicness depends on the relations and rights activated through that encounter.

3.2 Participation Is a Distribution of Consequential Roles

Participatory art research broadens the object of analysis from finished work to relations, labor, and collective process. Dialogic traditions emphasize conversation and mutual transformation [8]. Participatory geography adds politics, publics, and space, asking how human and non-human relations are assembled and how sites shape encounters [7]. Public pedagogy frames art as a site where citizenship, knowledge, and identity are learned or contested [9,25,43-46,57]. These traditions provide a richer account than audience attendance, but they also expose persistent ambiguities.

One ambiguity concerns authorship. Participants may contribute stories, images, construction labor, or presence while artists and institutions retain agenda-setting, selection, attribution, and final authority. Critiques of relational aesthetics warn that convivial encounter can conceal exclusion or suppress antagonism [61]. Socially engaged practice can expand agency, yet assessment cannot assume that ethical collaboration automatically produces aesthetic or political success [10]. Communication can fail when institutions stage listening without changing their decisions or when protest is translated into a predetermined artistic frame [12]. The politics of socially engaged art is therefore visible in who can reconfigure space, reframe experience, and challenge what is taken for granted [11].

Case literature makes the continuum concrete. Temporary structures created with marginalized youth can enable appropriation while still operating under regulatory and professional constraints [13]. Small co-created interventions can activate neglected spaces and build networks, but their durability depends on continued stewardship [14]. Citizen mobilization can reclaim public spaces under weak municipal capacity, yet campaign formats and competitions also define who participates and which outcomes count [16]. Co-production research consequently treats public art as a negotiated geography involving artists, commissioners, residents, infrastructures, and more-than-human materials [17].

Five roles recur in the reviewed accounts. Some participants encounter and interpret a work; others give testimony or express a view. A contribution goes further by adding content or labor within an existing brief. Co-decision occurs only when participants can alter such matters as the brief, budget, design, rules, or evaluation criteria. Stewardship extends authority into maintenance, adaptation, archiving, or removal. These roles can overlap, and a project does not always benefit from pushing every participant toward the highest level. What matters is an accurate account of the role that was actually available.

Interaction alone is weak evidence of empowerment unless it changes a consequential decision.

3.3 Inclusion Requires Attention to Exclusion Mechanisms

Public art has been used to address social exclusion, but inclusion is not a stable property of a participatory format. Sharp, Pollock, and Paddison show that public art may be inclusionary and exclusionary within the same regeneration process [2]. Pollock and Sharp's Raploch case rejects both celebratory participation and a simple "tyranny" verdict: contestation and contradiction can be appropriate expressions of community difference [4]. Under neoliberal urbanism, collaborative art may become entangled with regeneration agendas, precarious labor, and institutional legitimation [18-20]. Research in China, Hong Kong, and South Korea similarly shows that local state structures, rural transformation, protest geographies, and civic spectacle configure what participation can do [21-24].

Marginalized publics are not interchangeable. Black women artist-activists, Indigenous language practitioners, dementia communities, students, migrants, and youth enter public art through distinct histories and constraints [26,27,42-48,56,58]. Phenomenological accounts of arts-based placemaking further show that inclusion is lived through bodily and spatial experience rather than captured by access statistics alone [39]. A project can widen one group's visibility while appropriating another group's memory or labor. Inclusion claims should therefore identify which barriers were altered: material access, linguistic access, recognition, compensation, authorship, representation, safety, or institutional response. They should also identify who remained absent and whether absence reflected refusal, exclusion, or lack of opportunity.

This produces a second conclusion: participation becomes public when it makes roles, constraints, and consequences visible. The number of participants cannot substitute for evidence about whose input changed what.

4. Spatial Governance and the Afterlife of Art

4.1 Commissioning Is Part of the Artwork's Public Meaning

Public art is often evaluated at unveiling, but its public character begins earlier and extends later. Commissioning sets the problem, eligible forms, budget, timeline, selection panel, contractual ownership, and acceptable risk. Installation allocates space and may displace existing uses. Maintenance determines whether the work remains accessible, becomes unsafe, is altered, or is removed. Evaluation decides which outcomes are recognized and funded again.

The literature on public-art advocacy shows why these phases matter. Regeneration programs often attribute place identity, social cohesion, or economic benefits to an artwork without isolating the effects of concurrent investment [1,40,41]. Public-art producers can sustain different claims at different project stages [3]. Public evaluation thus requires a temporal account: baseline conditions; commissioning and conflict; implementation; immediate reception; continued use; maintenance; and possible removal. Participatory evaluation methods can combine observation, interviews, public interpretation, and governance records rather than relying on a single satisfaction score [64].

Temporary and tactical projects make temporality especially visible. Artistic acupuncture, windowscape activation, research-to-action projects, and spatial negotiation can open provisional uses and relationships [49-52]. Playful co-design may make negotiation accessible [53], and walking practices can produce situated knowledge that conventional consultation misses [54]. Yet temporariness can also permit institutions to claim participation without transferring assets or responsibilities. Studies of failure and reparative practice are valuable because they reveal how resources, promises, and maintenance obligations were distributed [55].

4.2 Publicness Includes Rights to Disagreement and Revision

Governance is not successful merely when conflict disappears. Projects often stage incompatible claims about heritage, safety, identity, land, or development. A public process must make disagreement legible without treating marginalized dissent as a communications problem. The possibility of revision is crucial: can a work be reinterpreted, augmented, relocated, maintained differently, or removed, and who decides?

This view aligns public art with democratic space rather than consensus decoration. It also changes evaluation. A contested project may have opened a suppressed issue, but visibility alone does not prove democratic benefit. Evidence should show whether affected groups could respond, whether institutions gave reasons, whether procedures were transparent, and whether contestation shaped future decisions. Conversely, apparent harmony may reflect exclusion, fatigue, or lack of redress.

The third conclusion is that the publicness of an artwork is partly located in its governance afterlife. An unveiling is an event; publicness is a continuing allocation of rights, responsibilities, and revision capacity.

5. Cultural Memory and Agonistic Public Art

Monuments expose the relationship between representation and authority. Public commemoration selects what becomes visible, durable, and teachable, often through institutions with unequal resources. Counter-monuments and artistic interventions challenge the apparent permanence of official memory by introducing absence, vulnerability, interruption, or competing narratives [28-33].

Agonistic memory offers a useful but bounded account. Artistic interventions can unsettle hegemonic narratives and encourage multiperspectival interpretation, yet durable counter-hegemonic reimagining depends on continued social and cultural practices [28]. Monument controversy is therefore not a temporary obstacle on the way to a final neutral solution. It can constitute an ongoing democratic negotiation of public space [29]. Work on sound, ephemerality, and counter-monumentality shows how memory may be performed rather than fixed in stone [30,31]. Studies of locality and counter-monuments connect form to place-specific histories [32], while queer monuments foreground visibility, counteraction, and legacy [33].

The key distinction is between representing a public and enabling publics to contest representation. A commission that adds an omitted figure may broaden the symbolic field but still preserve centralized selection. An intervention that invites testimony may produce plural memory but expose participants to risk. Removal may address harm yet erase evidence of how power operated. No formal strategy guarantees publicness. Each must be assessed through authority, access, safety, attribution, archival practice, and the capacity of affected groups to shape the memory regime.

Memory studies therefore add a fifth dimension to the review: representational publicness. It concerns who is depicted, who is absent, who is authorized to interpret, how disagreement is recorded, and whether the work supports continued public reasoning rather than a closed official lesson.

6. Digital Mediation: Interaction Is Not Agency

Digital media complicate the spatial and institutional boundaries of public art. Networked works distribute participation across physical and virtual sites; locative media overlay personal narratives on urban space; hybrid installations connect sensors, screens, archives, and mobile devices. Early digital-public-art theory recognized that networks could expand intervention, collaborative production, filtering, and archiving while embedding authority in protocols and software [34]. Locative-media research similarly showed that augmenting space also means authoring what becomes perceivable and shareable [35]. New media and socially engaged art can be mutually reinforcing, but the relation depends on social organization rather than technological novelty [36,65].

The most important distinction is between interaction and agency. A system may respond to movement, clicks, or uploaded content while participants cannot change its categories, moderation, visibility, ownership, or persistence. Public-display research shows that citizens are often engaged late and within limited interaction modalities; early development and broader participation remain persistent gaps [37]. Frameworks for massive digital participation accordingly evaluate inclusiveness, transparency, deliberation, influence, and accountability rather than input volume alone [38].

Digital mediation adds at least five governance questions. Who can connect, given device, language, disability, and bandwidth differences? Who defines input categories and acceptable content? How are contributions filtered, ranked, moderated, or removed? Who owns data and derivative content? What remains accessible after the exhibition, and who can correct or delete it? These questions connect digital art to spatial publicness because interfaces can extend a site while also introducing remote platforms, vendors, and terms of service.

Digital tools may support inclusion when they provide multiple entry modes, accessible interfaces, transparent moderation, public archives, and consequential feedback. They may undermine it when participation is reduced to data extraction, when generative systems obscure training sources and authorship, or when personalization fragments a common forum. The review found insufficient evidence for claiming that digital or AI mediation inherently democratizes public art. Technology should be evaluated as an institutional arrangement with affordances, exclusions, and owners.

7. A Six-Dimensional Framework for Judging Publicness

Six dimensions emerged as useful points of comparison. Their function is diagnostic: they show where a claim to publicness is supported, where the evidence contradicts it, and where the record remains incomplete. They should not be combined into a single score for a concept whose meaning is necessarily contested.

Access and encounter. The first dimension concerns the practical conditions under which people can see, enter, remain in, understand, and safely use a site or interface. Disability, language, opening times, policing, cost, and technological access may each alter the encounter.

Voice and authorship. Attention then turns to the framing of the issue and the production of knowledge or form. Attribution and the ability to refuse matter here, as does a precise description of the role offered to participants.

Resources and decision power. A stronger test is whether public input changes a consequential decision. Evidence may be found in control over the brief, budget, selection process, schedule, data, or evaluation criteria.

Spatial control and stewardship. Rules of use continue to shape a work after installation. Maintenance, conflict management, adaptation, relocation, and removal reveal where continuing authority lies.

Representation and memory contestation. This dimension examines the histories that receive authorization or archival protection, along with those that are challenged or excluded. It also asks whether disagreement and counter-memory can be sustained without exposing participants to avoidable harm.

Media protocols and data governance. For mediated works, participation is structured by interfaces, algorithms, moderation, property rights, and archives. Public agency is more credible when these arrangements can be inspected, challenged, or revised.

The dimensions interact. Physical access without voice produces spectatorship. Voice without resources may produce consultation. Co-authorship without stewardship can end when funding ends. Digital contribution without protocol transparency can intensify extraction. Representational inclusion without revision rights can freeze a new official narrative. Publicness is strongest when relevant dimensions are connected through accountable procedures, but projects need not maximize every dimension. A temporary performance may prioritize encounter and counter-memory; a permanent memorial may require unusually strong stewardship and revision provisions. Evaluation should be proportionate to the project's claims.

8. Implications for Practice and Research

For commissioning, the review suggests moving participation upstream. Before selecting a form, institutions should document the affected publics, existing uses and conflicts, participation roles, decision points, compensation, access provisions, and post-installation responsibilities. A participation statement should specify what is open to change and what is fixed. This makes limited participation honest and prevents symbolic consultation from being mistaken for co-governance.

Evaluation is most credible when the evidence is tied to the claim being made. Observation and access data can establish how people encountered a work, but they reveal little about influence. Records of proposals and institutional responses are more informative when voice is at issue. An argument about empowerment requires evidence that a decision or resource moved, while changes in belonging or memory call for plural accounts collected over time, including dissenting ones. Economic and regeneration effects are harder to attribute because art projects often coincide with other place-based investment. Negative and null findings belong in the record instead of being treated as reputational threats.

For digital work, technical documentation is part of public accountability. Projects should state what data are collected, how content is filtered, who can moderate or export it, what licenses apply, and what happens when a platform closes. Interface accessibility and low-technology alternatives should be planned from the outset. Generative AI should not be treated as public participation merely because it produces variable outputs; the relevant questions concern training data, prompt authority, model ownership, attribution, bias, and whether affected communities can challenge the system.

Research would benefit from longitudinal comparisons across commissioning models, regions, and the later lives of projects. The present literature contains many detailed cases, yet relatively few studies follow the relationship between claims of publicness and observed decision power over time. The six dimensions could support such comparisons without being

collapsed into a universal index. A useful design might connect governance documents and participation records with spatial observation, interviews, accessibility audits, and archival analysis. The aim would be to explain situated differences and conflicts, not to erase them through standardization.

9. Conclusion

Placing an artwork outdoors creates the possibility of a public encounter, but the literature reviewed here gives little reason to treat location as sufficient. Advocacy can announce benefits before they are demonstrated, and an interactive format may leave decision-making untouched. Attendance figures say little about who was excluded, while an absence of visible conflict may indicate fatigue or lack of redress. Digital mediation introduces the same problem in another form because a wider channel for input can coexist with concentrated control over data and rules.

A more useful assessment begins with the arrangements that surround a work: access and authorship, the allocation of resources, authority over space, the treatment of memory, and the protocols of any media system. Publicness becomes more substantial when affected people can interpret the work, influence decisions that matter, contest its representations, and retain a role in what happens later. These conditions are rarely distributed equally. Disagreement may therefore disclose the formation of a public, provided that institutions make room for response and revision.

This first-round integrative review supplies a traceable map of the literature and a six-dimensional framework for reading individual projects. The framework is neither a universal scale nor evidence of causal effects, and the search cannot claim exhaustive global coverage. Its narrower contribution is to redirect attention from the label “public art” to the mechanisms and continuing authority through which a public is made.

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