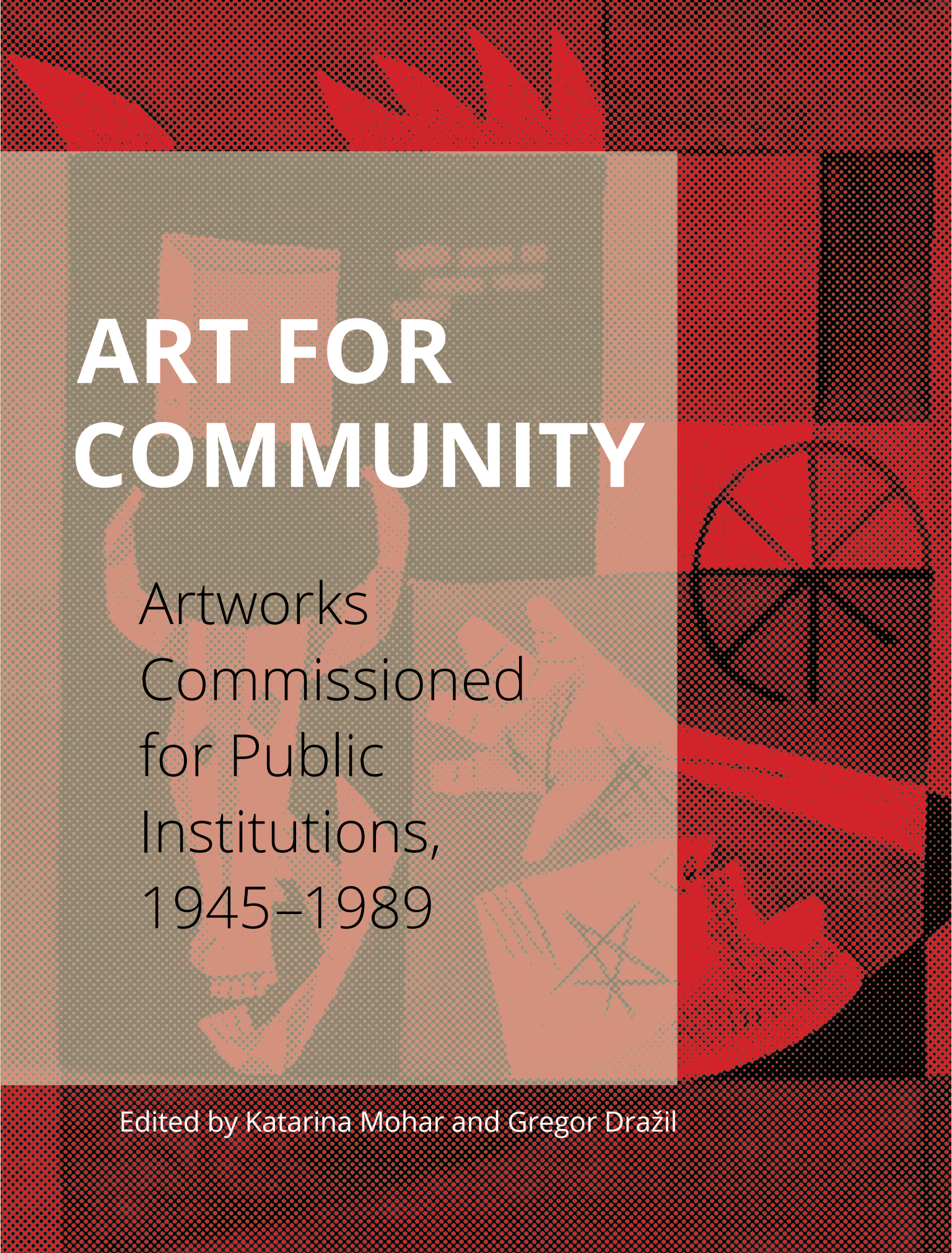




ART FOR COMMUNITY

Artworks
Commissioned
for Public
Institutions,
1945–1989

Edited by Katarina Mohar and Gregor Dražil



Založba ZRC



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Ljubljana, 2026

Opera Instituti Artis Historiae

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Cover image: Ivo Šubic, unrealised sketch for the mosaic in the building of the People's Assembly of the People's Republic of Slovenia.
Photo: Andreja Rakovec, ZRC SAZU.

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THE GOVERNMENT OF ART: DEMOCRACY AND STATE PUBLIC ART IN SWEDEN 1937–2027

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What can public art do for democracy? Should it be understood primarily as an instrument, as a means to an end, deployed by the state to strengthen the social contract, or rather as an autonomous practice that opens spaces for agonism, dissent, and alternative imaginaries? Swedish cultural policy researchers and art historians have argued that art plays a vital role in the development of the welfare state due to its inherent creative freedom, which, they suggest, enables citizens to envision the diversity and openness needed for an egalitarian society. Some go further, claiming that art can stimulate the imagination in ways that encourage the public to resist oppression and counter authoritarian tendencies.¹

Since 1937, the Swedish state has used a “1% funding model” for public art commissioned for state facilities. Although this has functioned as a recommendation rather than a binding financial commitment, the intention has been to provide public art while safeguarding artistic freedom through the “arm’s-length principle.” This principle is meant to ensure that artists can create without political interference.² The two thousand artworks commissioned for the state between 1937 and 2025 have played a significant role in the creation of modern and contemporary public art in Sweden. In this chapter, we outline the research design for our project *The Government of Art: Democracy and State Public Art in Sweden 1937–2027*, which aims to analyse the function of these artworks using a novel multidimensional approach.³ We will also present findings from Oscar Svanelid’s postdoctoral research project *Public Art in Closed Spaces*, highlighting the fact that the artworks have been located in closed institutions, such as prisons and nuclear power plants, as well as in more open spaces, such as universities and railway stations. Together, our preliminary findings point to the critical insight that state facilities have been designed not only as spaces for governance and public administration but also as cultural arenas where site-specific art is presented to the general public as well as civil servants, politicians, students, soldiers, and prisoners, etc.

However, it is obvious that the “arm’s-length principle” is not without contradiction. Institutions often influence artistic outcomes by making

aesthetic judgements about which artists and projects receive public funding.⁴ Our project will set out from the premise that the history of state support for public art has complicated, and in many ways contradicted, the idea that art in Sweden is structurally independent of political governance. This tension is evident not only in the aesthetic discrimination determining which artists receive funding, a process that shifts in response to prevailing aesthetic norms and preferences, but also in the selection of environments for commissioned public artworks. Together, these mechanisms reveal how state structures influence the conditions of artistic production, despite claims of preserving its autonomy.

On the other hand, artworks should not be viewed as independent entities but as agentic subjects that, through their embedded placement in state environments, perform governance tasks. This notion of the agency of state-commissioned art draws on the post-Foucauldian philosopher Thomas Lemke's understanding of "environmentality".⁵ We propose that this perspective offers an approach to analysing the political agency of publicly funded art and its relationship to the governance and democratic responsibilities of the state as *operating within*, rather than standing free from or in opposition to, state governance.

Our project thus asserts the value of reinstating the state as a key concept for discussing public art and its relationship to governance. This position stems from our historical and geographical focus, which traces the integration of art within the Swedish welfare society, characterised during the postwar period by "a continuous expansion of state-produced welfare services",⁶ as well as the subsequent dismantling of the welfare state through neoliberal reforms in recent decades. In the project, we primarily define the state as a complex infrastructure of state-administered material and physical environments, while simultaneously acknowledging, as state theorist Bob Jessop notes, that "the precise boundaries between the state and/or political system and other institutional orders and systems are generally in doubt and change over time."⁷ Furthermore, we understand the state not only as a set of "social relations" but also an aesthetic order whose appearance and legitimacy are reproduced, in part, through the state-commissioned artworks we examine.⁸ This is not to suggest that the state, or the art produced under its auspices, constitutes a monolithic entity. On the contrary, we are interested in how these artworks renegotiate and transform the boundaries and functions of the Swedish state within specific material, temporal, and institutional settings.

“Environmentality” is defined by Thomas Lemke as a set of governance policies, strategies, and techniques “that seek to steer and manage performances and circulations by acting on and controlling the heterogeneities and differences that make up a milieu.”⁹ This theoretical frame thus describes a mode of governance that extends beyond, yet also overlaps with, the disciplinary society’s technologies for normalising and standardising behaviour, shifting instead towards a stronger emphasis on how governance shapes material conditions in ways that optimise systemic functioning.¹⁰ While Lemke analyses environmental technologies of power primarily through examples drawn from urban planning and “vital systems security”, we propose that environmentality is equally useful for examining welfare state initiatives for commissioning art to engage with, transform, and recalibrate the material and physical conditions of state spaces where people reside, visit, and work.

We also argue that this theoretical framework is advantageous because it transcends the idea of artworks as unique objects, while also challenging the idealised view of art as an “unbound force with freedom of speech as its ground,” as a recent Swedish report on artistic freedom phrases it.¹¹ As artworks in government buildings must adapt to the expectations and regulations of each site, which, of course, vary significantly between, for example, prisons and universities, they are neither free nor “unbound”. This, however, does not mean that the works analysed in this project are to be viewed as passive and inert. On the contrary, our project set out to demonstrate that artworks may possess the capacity, if not necessarily the effect, to generate dissensus and challenge power structures within state environments. This theoretical perspective aligns with philosopher Juliane Rebentisch’s argument that the “aestheticization of politics” should not always be seen as a populist distortion or spectacularisation of the political sphere, as Walter Benjamin famously suggested, but can also serve as a medium for cultivating a critical sensibility within democratic societies.¹²

Our project aims to develop a digital methodological approach for analysing art in government buildings that differs from the case studies of unique works, projects, and singular artists that have dominated the research field of public art both internationally and in the Nordic countries.¹³ This approach addresses an observation raised in the online lecture series for the Artl@s 2023-2024 Conversation Series in Digital Art History regarding the urgent need for more productive and sustained collaborations between traditional and digital art history.¹⁴ However, thus far, these collaborations have tended to perpetuate outdated theories

and the traditional art historical canon.¹⁵ Our project will suggest a way out of this dilemma by applying a quali-quantitative analysis¹⁶ to empirical material not incorporated into the art historical canon, starting from a research question that does not rely on any implicit assumptions about the quality of individual artworks or artists. Our digital analysis will enable us to “think relationally” and record all kinds of features, including those that appear generic.¹⁷ This will potentially reveal features that are structurally determinant as well as those that are distinctive or singular within the dataset.

We set out to analyse a dataset comprising two thousand permanent works commissioned for state environments over the past ninety years. It provides searchable metadata on the artwork’s title, year of production, geographic region, governmental authority, medium, size, and material. This allows us to map the geographic distribution of state-commissioned artworks across Sweden. We will also analyse the distribution of art among policy sectors to determine if certain social groups have been favoured while others have been marginalised as recipients of state resources for public art commissions. The metadata also offer numerous opportunities for relational analysis between categories. This can yield significant results, for example, regarding either the concentrations of or the absence of a medium, such as textile art or sculpture, within specific institutions or during particular periods.

Our project will also analyse photographs of the two thousand state-commissioned artworks in the database and code their visual data into straightforward classifications. These include, for example, whether humans, animals, or other living creatures are present in the image or object, and whether it features representations of nature or organic materials. We will also consider whether the work is abstract or figurative and if it explicitly relates to a topic associated with the commission site. Lastly, our visual analysis will progress along a diachronic axis, focusing on how the interactions between artworks and state environments have evolved over time. This methodological step will also include identification of data clusters across the extended time period of 1937–2025. For example, this could involve grouping works that share similar traits, which may reveal how the role of art changes in response to socio-political and cultural policy shifts. A key example is how the gradual erosion of the Swedish welfare state in favour of neoliberal governance starting in the 1980s has affected the role of state-commissioned public art. Within this final step, we will conduct studies on specific environments to closely examine the viewing situations of the artworks and how these are altered

by architectural or functional modifications of buildings. We will also consider the reception of artworks in the media or within the institution, and discuss how our understanding of their critical agency shifts over time in response to broader socio-political transformations.

Our preliminary findings demonstrate the potential of our multidimensional analysis to produce interesting results. We have already identified a wide geographical distribution of state-commissioned permanent art, addressing individuals and groups ranging from the Prime Minister and government officials to workers at nuclear power plants, employees at the state-owned train company's wheel workshop, and teenagers in juvenile detention centres. This breadth, we argue, underscores the relevance of our theoretical approach. The Swedish state has cultivated an artistic domain that embodies a principle of fundamental equality, where everyone is both a subject and a target audience of state art, regardless of whether they wield state power or are governed. Therefore, we propose that the state initiatives for permanent art commissions can only be fully understood through an analytical lens that looks beyond the dichotomy between governors and governed, or between a paternalistic government and its citizens, towards a more comprehensive account of state-commissioned art as a component of environmental modes of governance.

"Art for all" since 1937

Like that of its Nordic neighbours, Swedish cultural policy is characterised by relatively high public subsidies for the arts. Until recently, there has been a strong consensus among political parties regarding the importance of "democratising culture", which has often been interpreted to imply governmental initiatives promoting public access to the arts.¹⁸ This viewpoint was articulated in the government's rationale for establishing the Public Art Agency Sweden (*Statens konstråd*) in 1937, and this agency has played a crucial role in shaping the physical environment of the Swedish welfare state by commissioning new, site-specific permanent artworks for public buildings ever since. This initiative framed the social democratic welfare state as the leading investor in the arts, taking over from the church, "pomp-loving princes", and bourgeois patrons.¹⁹ With a state funding model based on a "1% rule", art was envisioned "to become in the possession of all (*konsten ska bliva allas egendom*)" by being integrated into "public buildings, assembly halls, as well as workplaces, factories, and offices."²⁰ Since 1937, the Public Art Agency has been the main

national agency responsible for administering state funding for public art. Alongside this national framework, separate funding structures exist at regional and municipal levels, which also support public art through their own cultural budgets.

Yet the cultural governance of the Swedish state should not be understood solely as a mechanism for funding public art; it should also be recognised as a key recipient. Between 1937 and 1996, policy directives stipulated that the Public Art Agency's primary responsibility was to commission or acquire art for newly constructed state buildings. Consequently, state agencies, enterprises, and organisations have received approximately 90% of the permanent artworks commissioned with state funds up to the present day. Other sites, such as municipal buildings, regional hospitals, public squares, parks, and other communal spaces not managed by the state, fell under the jurisdiction of municipal or regional administrations, as well as private and corporate actors.²¹ This arrangement changed in 1996, when the Public Art Agency received a new set of policy directives from the government which, as architectural historian Catharina Gabrielsson notes, "was based on the use of the public environment rather than ownership, while at the same time highlighting society's responsibility for shaping this environment as an aesthetic whole."²² This shift is also evident in the statistics, with a significant increase in permanent works created for non-state environments since the late 1990s, which constitute 36% of the total number of newly produced artworks since the turn of the millennium (187 out of 510 works).

Cultural theorists have pointed out that Sweden's cultural policy for "democratising" the arts has served not only to enhance public access to art as a cultural good but also to function as a form of "aesthetic engineering"²³ of the population designed to foster "citizen subjects",²⁴ or even "quality people",²⁵ capable of self-regulatory participation in government policy.²⁶ In other words, state-commissioned art has long been expected to act as a tool, even an engine, for Sweden's "cultivated development, both of the individual as a person and of society as a democratic community."²⁷ While governance structures for public art have changed since 1937, we argue that the underlying expectation that art should be active in shaping environments that optimise the functioning of the state system has persisted to the present day.

Art for students, soldiers, and the political elites

Our preliminary study of the artworks commissioned for state environments reveals geographic and temporal clusters, as well as an uneven distribution of artistic media and visual themes across different policy areas. We found a high concentration of state-funded permanent art at universities (28%) and the Swedish Armed Forces (11%). Art commissions for universities remained stable from the 1940s to the 1970s, during which they accounted for around one-fourth of the total number of works. After a decline in the 1980s, universities have become even more significant recipients of state-commissioned art, reaching a peak in the 1990s when these institutions received nearly half of all works (178 out of 388 works).²⁸ The effort to provide universities with permanent artworks in lecture halls, seminar rooms, libraries, canteens, and other spaces where students spend their days indicates the existence of a tacit aesthetic curriculum in Swedish higher education, parallel to scholastic and intellectual training. Since higher education is also accessible to the working classes through free education and student loans, it can indeed be viewed as an instrument to acclimatise students from the working class to the “stylization of life” that accompanies social advancement, which is the aim of their education.²⁹ By encouraging them to adjust their “popular taste”, the artworks accustom them to develop a distance from “necessity” in matters of taste and adopt a more “disinterested” attitude towards art that higher education and well-paying jobs produce.³⁰

When it comes to the Swedish Armed Forces, a more irregular temporal spread can be observed. It was not until the mid-1960s that military facilities were recognised as suitable venues for state-commissioned art, with the monumental mural *Utan titel* (Untitled, 1956, Gert Kaffa) in the dining room at the Karlskrona Coastal Artillery Regiment premises being the only exception. The initial neglect was counterbalanced by a large-scale initiative in the 1970s and 1980s, during which as many as 168 new artworks were created for Swedish military sites such as regiments, headquarters, and military schools. This contrasts with developments since the turn of the millennium, when only 13 new works were commissioned for these sites.³¹ This stark shift highlights the need to consider state investments in permanent art as interlinked with changes in other policy areas, particularly defence policy in this instance. As Svanelid has discussed more thoroughly elsewhere, the state’s investment in art for the military reflects the shift from Sweden’s neutrality policy during the Cold War – which depended on maintaining a robust military presence across the country – to the post-national defence policy that led to the disbandment of several regiments in the 1990s and 2000s.³²



Figure 1.
Knut-Erik Lindberg,
Mor och barn, Fostran
(Mother and Child,
Upbringing). Marble,
1953. Commissioned for
Småskoleseminariet in
Landskrona.
Photo: © Sten Vilson.

These findings reveal that Sweden's state funding for public art, although grounded in the principle of equality, reveals discrepancies in its distribution. We have observed that soldiers and conscripts, along with university students, have been the primary beneficiaries of state-commissioned art and thus form the foundation of its welfare vision of "cultivated development". Therefore, our understanding of the 1930s vision that the state would make art accessible to all should be refined as the data suggest that this accessibility is heavily reliant on particular social contexts or positions. Distinct concentrations can be observed at the university campuses of Lund and Uppsala, which together have received 94 artworks. In contrast, areas with a weaker state infrastructure have received fewer works, such as the Västmanland and Kronoberg regions for which the state has only produced 33 works. In terms of funding for permanent art, the state's strategy has not been to distribute its resources evenly across the population

but rather to create art clusters within specific governmental sites and policy fields.

The 1937 vision of enhancing the accessibility of art was also grounded in a social concern: art was to be understood as a public good rather than a luxury reserved for the wealthy elite population. The government maintained that art played a vital role in fostering and supporting the population, and that this role was especially significant in places where needs were greatest.³³ This approach was particularly evident in the 1940s and 1950s, when state-run hospitals, schools for the education of girls (*Högre allmänna läroverket för flickor*), and institutions for training primary school teachers (*Småskoleseminariet*) became key sites for state-commissioned art [Figure 1].

However, examining the data of the two thousand works reveals patterns that contradict the idea that the Swedish welfare state focused its art resources on permanent art for groups considered to have special needs

rather than the elite. We have found, for example, that between 1937 and 1989, more artworks were commissioned for government departments or ministries in Stockholm (31 works) than for all Swedish prisons during the same period (26 works), despite the latter representing a much larger government sector. The County Administrative Boards of Sweden (*Länsstyrelsen*), a governmental body responsible for implementing the state's political policy at the regional level, have also been major recipients of public art commissions. Therefore, it can be argued that the Swedish state's cultural policy for democratising art has led to a substantial concentration of art resources in the corridors of political power. This argument is further supported by a lack of interest in commissioning art for government authorities responsible for marginalised and/or socio-economically disadvantaged groups such as immigrants (*Migrationsverket*) and the unemployed (*Arbetsförmedlingen*), which, over the past ninety years, have received only three permanent works.

Art in action

By mapping the locations of state-commissioned permanent art, we can gain a clearer understanding of where the art is expected to operate. The next step in our analysis, which remains an ongoing process at this stage, is to determine what characterises these works and how they relate to the state environments for which they were commissioned and created. First, it should be noted that the artworks commissioned for government sites, such as universities, the Prime Minister's office, military facilities, and judicial buildings, have, with few exceptions, refrained from displaying images of heroes or great men. The works also typically do not include symbols that convey socio-economic prestige or fame. Instead, we have observed a large body of abstract as well as figurative works – tapestries, murals, sculptures, photography, etc. – which have been used to decorate government buildings over the decades and across various policy sectors. The significance of these works should not be downplayed, as they embody the government's key aim of using art as a tool to enhance the aesthetic value of state environments.

This highlights a cornerstone of the Swedish welfare state's aesthetic engineering, which has sought to “manipulate the sensual fabric of everyday life so as to mold even the simplest needs and behaviors into an aesthetic form.”³⁴ This decorative function is exemplified in the monumental works of geometric abstraction commissioned in the 1950s for the Lund University (*Vertikal composition*, 1956, Arne Jones), the Halland County



Figure 2. Arne Jones, *Vertikal composition* (*Vertical Composition*). Copper sheet, 1956. Commissioned for Lund University Medical Faculty.
Photo: © Ricard Estay.

Administrative Board (*Konkretistiska kompositioner*, 1958, Axel Olson), and the post offices at Landskrona (*Vertikal miljö*, 1955, Martin Holmgren) and Östersund (*Paket i långa banor*, 1952, Lennart Rodhe), to name but a few examples [Figure 2].³⁵ Although the governance goal of linking art to decorative values faced increasing criticism in the following decades, works with this function have continued to be produced for the most diverse Swedish state environments, ranging from the black bronze sculptures of flowers at the entrance of the medical faculty at the Linköping University (*Wallflowers*, 2005, Katrine Helmersson) to a large-scale colour field painting on the façade of the central guard facility at the high-security Kumla Prison (*Inrainbow*, 2010, Britta Kjellgren Jäger).

Another category identified in the analysis consists of artworks that illustrate or, in other ways, engage with the activities of government spaces. This isomorphic type is common in universities, where works affirm the educational focus associated with the department for which they are created. This is evident in the monumental sculpture *Från Leonardo* (From Leonardo, 1971, Koman Ilhan and Kanra Çetin), which is based on Leonardo da Vinci's famous drawing, Vitruvian Man, and created for the School

of Architecture in Stockholm, whose motto is “Art and Science”. The sculpture *Mitos* (Mitosis, 1991, Lena Cedergren), created for the former Department of Zoophysiology at Lund University, illustrates the cell division process, mitosis, a fundamental basis for zoophysiological studies. The way artworks interact with the site also extends into the mythological sphere, as seen, for example, in depictions of mermaids and sirens in works commissioned for the Swedish Navy. This is similarly true for Nils Möllerberg’s bronze sculpture of the deity Sigyn from 1941, commissioned for the Department of Geology at the Lund University. Drawing on a well-known episode from Norse mythology, the sculpture portrays Sigyn as she protects the earth from earthquakes by holding out a bowl to catch the venom dripping from a snake in the cave where Loki is imprisoned. There are also examples of artworks that adopt a more agonistic or ironic stance towards their institutional contexts, such as Armand Rossander’s mosaic of the “Tax Devil” (*Skattedjävulen*), created for the Swedish Tax Agency in 1952.

Over the decades, state-commissioned permanent artworks have also served the purpose of promoting moral values in governance. The fresco *Livet fyller världen* (Life Fills the World, 1940, Tor Hörlin), commissioned for a communal area for nurses at the Karolinska Hospital, depicts a naturalistic scene of a mother holding her infant while a young woman gently cradles a bird. This painting conveys to the nurses the moral (and patriarchal) message that caring for the weak is not only their professional duty but also a natural instinct arising from their femininity. The hanging sculpture *Relationair* (2006, Karin Lind) at a public high school features a circle with neon signs that repeat the phrase “we are” in several European languages and Arabic. This work serves as a reminder to students about the foundational human equality that bridges language gaps and cultural divides. We are, in this sense, equal to each other. The street art mural *Urban allemansrätt* (Urban Commons, 2005, Daniel Diaz, Ossian Eckerman, and Arvid Wretman) at the Police Academy in the garage of the National Task Force conveys a quite different type of moral message. In this setting, police recruits train for challenging and high-risk situations where people’s lives are at stake. The moral message of the mural is delivered as a provocation, which suggests – as does its title – that urban space is for everyone, including those who do not behave well or appear suspicious. Through the inclusion of strange-looking creatures and pot-smoking teens, the mural can be viewed as cautioning the police recruits against making judgments based on stereotypical notions of good and bad [Figure 3].

Within this moral category are also works that take an agonistic stance to their placement within the government authority. Lenny Clarhäll’s wooden



Figure 3. Daniel Diaz, Ossian Eckerman, Arvid Wretman, *Urban allemansrätt* (*Urban Commons*). Acrylic, lacquer, ink, 2005. Commissioned for the National Task Force at Police Academy, Sörentorp. Photo: © Annika Jansson Selim.

relief *Under kurbitsen* (Under the Kurbit, 1982), commissioned for the entrance of a government ministry building in central Stockholm, depicts a modern urban landscape where a group of people have assembled to advocate for peace and protest against nuclear power, which refers to demonstrations organised by the Swedish feminist peace movement in the late 1970s. The scene also features a man who has passed out in a treetop beside his bottle, as well as a line of male bureaucrats heading towards a control room filled with screens and wires. Situated in the entrance hall, the work confronts politicians and state officials daily as they pass through on their way to their offices. Invoking a moral appeal, it urges them to listen to concerned citizens engaged in feminist and political peace movements and to address their issues. The moral and critical significance of *Under kurbitsen* is arguably even stronger today than when it was first installed in the early 1980s, as it stands in clear opposition to contemporary governmental aims of military mobilisation and further investments in nuclear power [Figure 4].

State-commissioned works may also infuse the architecture of government buildings with a human touch, conveying a sense of care and existential lightness that softens their appearance as mere vessels of state power and control. This governance function is particularly evident in works created for carceral facilities, such as the colourful play installations designed for children of inmates at various high-security prisons



Figure 4. Lenny Clarhäll, *Under kurbitsen* (Under the Kurbitsen). Wood relief, 1982. Commissioned for the Government Office in Stockholm. Photo: © Mailis Stensman.

in Sweden. This function is also discernible in the mural *10 scener M-Ö* (10 Scenes M-Ö, 2004, Thomas Elovsson), which transforms the concrete walls of an exercise yard at a detention centre in Uppsala into a playful scenography, greeting individuals awaiting their sentence with cheerful images of colourful stars and a very cute and smiling baby giraffe.

There are also works that, rather than injecting a sense of humour and play into the executive and judicial branches of the government, emphasise feelings such as sadness and loss. The sculptural work *Tårkanal* (Tear Channel, 1993, Gösta Sillén), created for the entrance of a police station that also includes a custody area, transforms part of the wall by angling the bricks and incorporating an open, cylindrical terrazzo shape. When viewed in light of its title, this work conveys the impression that the police building is weeping while also collecting its tears into a channel. The focus on affectivity in state-commissioned Swedish art also accommodates critical reflections on the effects of government authority over life, as seen in the sculptural installation *Egen ingång* (Private Entrance, 2014, Johan Thurfjell) at a juvenile home in Lund where young offenders are detained. This work features a miniature model of a private entrance with a locked bronze door. As the door remained shut, access to the space behind it was left solely to the imagination, making the model a representation of the privacy that the young individuals confined in this facility lacked.³⁶

A novel approach to art in governmental buildings

Our project will contribute to a more complex understanding of the notion of the autonomy of art and of the ways in which its potential for agency can be understood. We argue that research on public art should move beyond notions of the importance of the “arm’s-length principle”, understood as a defence against inappropriate political intervention, and instead focus on what it means for art to claim political agency within state space. The autonomy of art is often presented as a primary value for democratic culture, but we argue that this capacity is not only useful for maintaining a distance from the state but also for intervening in, reinforcing, or creating dissent from policy strategies. Our project seeks to identify instances where art interacts in these ways with the dominant sensory regime of a given environment.

Consequently, the project will contribute significantly to our understanding of the relationship between art and democracy. Rather than assuming the relative independence of art from the field of political governance, we start from the observation that for more than eighty years public art has been considered a key component in the material and physical design of Swedish state institutions. This agency of art and its capacity to engage in state space is our focus. It will allow us to identify which themes and issues have come to dominate state-commissioned artworks and how these relate to different constructions of norms and values essential to democracy, for example in relation to gender. We will also be able to explore the presence of issues that reflect the concerns of minority groups, as well as possible blind spots and exclusions.

The project will also be of value to art history as part of the digital humanities, as it will demonstrate how the use of computational methods can increase the quality and complexity of the expected outcome of the research questions, as well as the feasibility of the project. It relies on an innovative research design by linking digital tools with “relational thinking”. The analytical model combines data-driven analysis, digital coding, qualitative image analysis, and archival studies, presenting a multidimensional analytical framework for understanding the role of art in Swedish democracy.

Our project will also generate societal value as the results will be significant for Swedish cultural and administrative organisations working with public art. It will provide new and complex information on a large corpus of public art and analyses of artistic design as a dynamic component of cultural democracy, establishing specific regimes of sensory organisation. The results will also provide information on the actual outcomes of cultural policy for the arts and how the privatisation of state property

has affected them. This will be an important contribution to the ongoing discussion about whether privatisation can be seen as weakening the political power of the arts, ultimately undermining the democratic values it embodies and enacts. The current plans to build several new military facilities and prisons also offer an opportunity to examine the role of art, including its potential political agency, in the expansion of the Swedish Armed Forces and the Swedish Prison and Probation Service.

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Endnotes

- 1 Stefan Jonsson, *Den otyglade skönheten: 5 saker konsten vet om demokratin* (Stockholm: Norstedts, 2022); Lena Johannesson, "Demokratins symbolrum. Bild och självbild," in *Demokratins estetik. Demokratiutredningens forskarvolym IV.*, ed. Erik Amnå and Lena Johannesson (Stockholm: Fakta info direkt, 1999).
- 2 Per Mangset et al., "Editors' Introduction: Nordic Cultural Policy," *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 14, no. 1 (2008): 1–5. Swedish cultural policy is often seen as a dual structure balancing the protection of institutional autonomy for cultural organisations and art councils with the perspective of these entities as organisational bodies that manage and develop governmental support programmes, including grants and public commissions. See, for example, Per Mangset, "The Arm's Length Principle and the Art Funding System: A Comparative Approach," in *What About Cultural Policy? Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Culture and Politics*, ed. Miikka Pyykkönen, Niina Simanainen and Sakarias Sokka (Helsinki: Minerva, 2009), 293–295.
- 3 Our research project "The Government of Art: Democracy and State Public Art in Sweden 1937–2027" is still in the project-planning phase, and no start date has yet been set.
- 4 Merja Heikkinen, "Administrative Definitions of Artists in the Nordic Model of State Support for Artists," *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 11, no. 3 (2005): 325–340; Erik Erlanson, "Towards a new historical context for the understanding of cultural policy, or, the common enterprise of French Surrealist André Breton and Swedish Minister of Culture Ragnar Edenman," *Nordisk kulturpolitisk tidskrift* 24, no. 2 (2021): 106–108.
- 5 Thomas Lemke, *The Government of Things: Foucault and the New Materialisms* (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 168.
- 6 Bengt Larsson, Martin Letell and Håkan Thörn, "Transformations of the Swedish Welfare State: From Social Engineering to Governance?: An Introduction," in *Transformations of the Swedish Welfare State: From Social Engineering to Governance?*, ed. Bengt Larsson, Martin Letell and Håkan Thörn (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 3.
- 7 Bob Jessop, *State Power: A Strategic-Relational Approach* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 10.
- 8 The view of the state as a "social relation" that is continuously inscribed and transformed within an "institutional materiality" was famously advanced by sociologist Nicos Poulantzas. We would, however, like to extend this argument by emphasising that the state as a social relation, that is materialised through institutions, also encompasses an aesthetic order that forms part of its governance of things. Thus, the specific type of social relation through which state power is reproduced should also be seen to go through encounters with artworks. Cf. Nicos Poulantzas, *State, Power, Socialism* (London: Verso, 1978).
- 9 Lemke, *The Government of Things*, 168.
- 10 Lemke, *The Government of Things*, 168–171.
- 11 Myndigheten för kulturanalys, *Så fri är konsten: Den kulturpolitiska styrningens påverkan på den konstnärliga friheten* (Göteborg, 2021), 10. For further analysis of this governmental report, see Josefine Wikström, "An Art for Art's Sake or a Critical Concept of Art's Autonomy?," *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* 32, no. 65 (2023): 74–100.
- 12 Juliane Rebentisch, *The Art of Freedom: On the Dialectics of Democratic Existence*, trans. Joseph Ganahl (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), 1–13. Rebentisch argues that Walter Benjamin's famous remark about the aesthetisation of politics in fascism actually constitutes a form of anaesthetics "that desensitizes its own aesthetic nature", where the latter term is conceived as an operation within the socio-political and ethical realm that may promote a democratic culture of freedom. Rebentisch, *The Art of Freedom*, 230.
- 13 The modus operandi of public art research focusing on unique artists, art projects, and works, rather than on a systemic analysis of a larger dataset, is manifest in influential books such as Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002); Cameron Cartiere

- and Shelly Willis, eds., *The Practice of Public Art* (London: Routledge, 2008); Cameron Cartiere and Anthony Schrag, eds., *The Failures of Public Art and Participation* (London: Routledge, 2023).
- 14 See Artl@s/Visual Contagions Lecture Series in Digital Art History, "Do We Really Need Digital Art History?," org. Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, Catherine Dossin and Nicola Carboni, accessed April 8, 2024, <https://www.unige.ch/visualcontagions/seminars/dah-conversation/2023-2024-do-we-really-need-digital-art-history>.
 - 15 Anna Näslund Dahlgren and Amanda Wasielewski, "The Digital U-Turn in Art History," *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift/ Journal of Art History* 90, no. 4 (2021): 249–266.
 - 16 Cf. Anna Näslund Dahlgren and Amanda Wasielewski, "Critical Digital Art History: An Introduction," in *Critical Digital Art History: Interface and Data Politics in the Post-Digital Era*, ed. Anna Näslund Dahlgren and Amanda Wasielewski (Bristol: Intellect, 2024), 1–19.
 - 17 Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 224–247. For further discussion on Bourdieu's relational method, see, for example, Shaun Rawolle and Bob Lingard, "Bourdieu and Educational Research: Thinking Tools, Relational Thinking, Beyond Epistemological Innocence," in *Social Theory and Education Research: Understanding Foucault, Habermas, Bourdieu and Derrida*, ed. Mark Murphey (London: Routledge, 2022), 129–149.
 - 18 Mangset et al., "Editors' Introduction," 2; Kevin V. Mulcahy, "Preface: The Social-Democratic Model of Cultural Patronage," *The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society* 31, no. 1 (2001): 4.
 - 19 Statens konstråd, *Statens konstråd: En orientering samt redogörelse för rådets tre första verksamhetsår* (Stockholm: Ivar Hæggströms boktryckeri, 1940), 5.
 - 20 "Kungl. Maj:ts proposition 1937:157," Sveriges riksdag, accessed April 4, 2025, https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-och-lagar/dokument/proposition/kungl.-majlis-proposition-nr-157_dy30157/html/.
 - 21 Jessica Sjöholm Skrubbe, *Skulptur i folkhemmet: Den offentliga skulpturens institutionalisering, referentialitet och rumsliga situationer* (PhD diss., Stockholm: Makadam, 2007), 50–54.
 - 22 Catharina Gabrielsson, *Att göra skillnad: det offentliga rummet som medium för konst, arkitektur och politiska föreställningar* (PhD diss., Stockholm: Axl Books, 2006), 224–225.
 - 23 Erik Erlanson and Peter Henning, "Estetisk ingenjörskonst och konstens ekologisering: Richard Bergh, Mänskian och nutiden och Öyvind Fahlström," *Konsthistorisk tidskrift / Journal of Art History* 91, no. 2 (2022): 57–73.
 - 24 Cf. Étienne Balibar, *Citizen Subject: Foundations for Philosophical Anthropology*, trans. Steven Miller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).
 - 25 Alva Myrdal and Gunnar Myrdal, *Kris i befolkningsfrågan* (Stockholm: Bonnier, 1934), 246.
 - 26 Bo Stråth, "Nordic Modernity: Origins, Trajectories, Perspectives," in *Nordic Paths to Modernity*, ed. Jóhann Páland Árnason and Björn Wittrock (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2012), 25–48.
 - 27 Tobias Harding, "Culture Wars? The (Re)Politicization of Swedish Cultural Policy," *Cultural Trends* 31, no. 2 (2022): 117.
 - 28 Statistics of state-commissioned works at Swedish universities (including *högskolor*) compared to the total number of works, organised by decade: 1940s: 6/21 (29%), 1950s: 19/80 (24%), 1960s: 27/111 (24%), 1970s: 76/333 (23%), 1980s: 94/562 (17%), 1990s: 178/388 (46%), 2000s: 103/324 (32%), 2010s: 42/122 (34%), 2020–2025: 6/22 (27%). These statistics show significant differences in the number of works produced across decades. Notably, the 1980s stand out as a peak, marked by a significant mass production of state public art in Sweden with a total of 562 newly produced works, whereas the percentage of universities as recipients reached a high between 1990 and 2020.
 - 29 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (New York and London: Routledge, 1986), 54–55, 174–175. The "stylization of life" is a citation from Weber, see Max Weber, "Class, Status,

Party," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. Hans H. Gerth and Mills C. Wright (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 191.

- 30 Bourdieu, *Distinction*. Sweden still has a class system. In 2015, 49.3% of the population belonged to the working class, see Göran Ahrne, Niels Stöber and Max Thaning, "Struktur, klass och inkomster," in *Klass i Sverige. Ojämligheten, makten och politiken i det 21:a århundradet*, ed. Daniel Suhonen, Göran Therborn and Jesper Weithz (Lund: Arkiv förlag, 2021). Sweden was also one of the countries with the greatest social bias in recruitment to higher education when compared to other OECD countries, see *Svensk högre utbildning i internationell belysning: en studie baserad på internationell statistik* (Stockholm: Universitetskanslersämbetet, 2019), 25.
- 31 State-commissioned works for Swedish military sites, including schools and academies for military education: 1940s: 0/21, 1950s: 1/80 (1%), 1960s: 11/111 (10%), 1970s: 49/333 (15%), 1980s: 119/562 (21%), 1990s: 25/388 (6%), 2000s: 5/324 (2%), 2010s: 6/122 (5%), 2020-2022: 2/22 (9%).
- 32 Oscar Svanelid, "Welfare Art in the Swedish Military: The Changing Roles of State-Commissioned Permanent Artworks from Cold War Neutrality to Postnational Defence," *Konsthistorisk tidskrift / Journal of Art History* 93, no. 3 (2024): 175–195.
- 33 "Kungl. Maj:ts proposition 1937:157" (1937), 4–5. The central argument of the 1937 proposition concerns "the considerable importance of art in cultivating the public (konstens stora folkfostrande betydelse)", asserting that this need is greatest in institutions where people were considered most in need of the presumed beneficial effects of the formative arts, for example, hospitals and schools.
- 34 Erlanson and Henning, "Estetisk ingenjörskonst," 69.
- 35 Apart from the illustrations accompanying this article, all photographs of artworks referenced in the article are easily accessible in the digital archive of *Statens konstråd*. See Statens konstråd, accessed March 3, 2026, <https://statenskonstrad.se/upplev-konsten/sok-i-samlingen/>.
- 36 For a more detailed analysis of the role of state-commissioned public art in carceral spaces in Sweden and Norway, see Oscar Svanelid, "Public Art Behind Bars: Governance and Carceral Aesthetics in Sweden and Norway Since the Early 2000s," *Public Art Dialogue* 16, no. 1 (2026), 96–120. Accessible at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21502552.2025.2564475>.

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Vladanje z umetnostjo: demokracija in javna umetnost v državnih naročilih na Švedskem v letih 1937–2027

Povzetek

V poglavju je obravnavana politična avtonomnost javne umetnosti, nastale v okviru državnih naročil na Švedskem od leta 1937 do danes. Čeprav švedska kulturna politika načelo neodvisnosti umetnosti od neposrednega političnega odločanja (*arm's length principle*) tradicionalno razume kot varovalo umetniške avtonomije, naše raziskave kažejo, da so bila državna naročila vpeta v infrastrukture vladanja, zato so jih sooblikovale institucionalne prioritete, estetske norme in spreminjajoči se politični konteksti. Izhajajoč iz koncepta »okoljskosti« nemškega sociologa Thomasa Lemkeja, v poglavju zagovarjava tezo, da umetnine v državnih ustanovah – na univerzah, vojaških območjih, v zaporih, vladnih stavbah, bolnišnicah in policijskih postajah – delujejo kot sestavni deli okoljskega vladanja, saj sooblikujejo materialno in senzorično organizacijo vsakdanjega življenja. Javna umetnost zato ni niti zgolj instrument državne politike niti povsem avtonomno področje; politično učinkuje prav s svojo zmožnostjo, da utrjuje, preoblikuje ali izziva normativne ureditve države.

V poglavju je predstavljena raziskovalna zasnova projekta *The Government of Art: Democracy and State Public Art in Sweden 1937–2027*, v okviru katerega bo analiziranih dva tisoč umetniških del, stalno nameščenih v državnih ustanovah. Vključene so tudi ugotovitve podoktorskega projekta Oscarja Svanelida *Public Art in Closed Spaces*; avtor v njih opozarja, da so umetnine umeščene tako v zaprte ustanove – zapore in jedrske elektrarne – kot tudi v bolj dostopne prostore, na primer na univerze in železniške postaje. S kvalitativno-kvantitativno metodologijo, ki združuje analizo metapodatkov, digitalno kodiranje podob, relacijsko mapiranje in arhivsko raziskovanje, avtorja identificirava geografske, institucionalne in časovne zgostitve umetniške produkcije. Preliminarne ugotovitve kažejo, da so bila državna naročila razporejena neenakomerno: univerze in obožene sile so prejele nesorazmerno velik delež umetnin, državni organi, namenjeni marginaliziranim skupinam, na primer brezposelnim in priseljencem, pa so bili večinoma spregledani. Podatki razkrivajo tudi širok razpon vizualnih in tematskih strategij – od abstraktnih, dekorativnih del do prostorsko specifičnih (*site-specific*), moralizirajočih, ironičnih in kritičnih intervencij – ter kažejo, da je umetnost v državnih ustanovah sodelovala pri oblikovanju političnih, pedagoških in afektivnih okolij.

Z obravnavo javne umetnosti kot dela materialne arhitekture socialne države je v poglavju predlagana ponovna vpeljava države kot ključne kategorije pri raziskovanju umetnosti v javnem prostoru. Umetnine pri tem niso izolirani estetski objekti, temveč dejavniki, ki sodelujejo pri produkciji demokratičnih norm, družbenih imaginarijev in oblik državljske subjektivnosti. Tak pristop problematizira idealizirane narative o umetniški avtonomiji in v ospredje postavlja produktivne napetosti med politiko in umetniško avtonomijo. Projekt s tem prispeva k razpravam o kulturni demokraciji, državni estetiki in vlogi digitalnih metod v umetnostnozgodovinskem raziskovanju, obenem pa ponuja spoznanja, pomembna za sodobno kulturno politiko in za načrtovane širitve državnih ustanov, denimo zaporov in vojaških objektov.

A substantial body of postwar art created for institutional environments remains hidden in plain sight: in schools, hospitals, municipal offices, factories, hotels, shops, and other spaces of everyday life. Some works remain intact, others survive in altered interiors or as partial material remains, and still others are known only through scattered archival records, photographs, and uncertain

memories. Many have been covered, relocated, destroyed or forgotten, even though they formed an important part of postwar public space and visual culture.

This volume contributes to the transnational study of art

commissioned for public institutions, a field that remains unevenly researched across national contexts. The chapters show how institutions used art to shape their environments and how later changes in use or ownership affected the works' meanings and prospects for preservation.

