What Part Should the Public Play in Choosing Public Art?

By GRACE GLUECK

One of the hottest issues in the growing field of public art, the part that the public plays in choosing it, will be aired at a hearing March 6, called by the New York regional office of the Federal Government's General Services Administration. The hearing is sparked by "Tilted Arc," Richard Serra's highly controversial curving wall of rusted Corten steel, 120 feet long and 12 feet high, installed on the plaza of the Federal building complex at Foley Square in 1981. To be sure, the work—which bisects the plaza like the business end of a giant cleaver—was commissioned and paid for by the remarkable Art-in-Architecture program of the General Services Administration, which is responsible for the construction and care of Federal buildings. But in view of continuing protests about "Tilted Arc" (two months after its installation, some 1,300 Government employees who work in the building signed a petition for its removal) the agency is considering its relocation.

The hearing is "not to be construed as an attack on the Art-in-Architecture program, which has beautified Federal sites," says William Diamond, New York regional administrator of the General Services Administration. (Last Wednesday President Reagan presented Art-in-Architecture with an award citing it as one of the best Government design programs of the last decade.) "But for the three-and-one-half years since the sculpture's installation, we have received ongoing complaints from individuals and community organizations, who feel the plaza's use as a recreational and performance facility has been destroyed."

A persistent individual protestor has been Edward D. Re, chief judge of the United States Court of International Trade, which occupies a part of the complex that faces directly on the plaza. "Even if we were to assume, for the sake of argument that this 'piece' once had some semblance of artistic 'shock' value, this minimal value has long since dissipated, and we who work here are left with a once beautiful plaza rendered useless by an ugly, rusted, steel wall," Judge Re wrote recently to Ray Kline, acting administrator of the General Services Administration in Washington. "

But Mr. Serra himself, an important sculptor whose Minimal-oriented work has been publicly installed in a number of cities in the United States and abroad, and who will have a one-

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Titled Art" stands, awkward and stubborn, coming to the viewer the important message that, unlike politics, art is not just for the very few. Perhaps in the right direction, it seems to me that the removal of the work would be wrong; that this city, which serves as the stronghold and symbol of contemporary art for the world, can come to terms with, and even learn to enjoy, the pugnacious refusal of "Titled Art" to be removed.

In a recent meeting with Mr. Diamond, Jenny Dixon, director of the Public Art Fund, a non-profit organization which is part of the permanent basis of New York city, proposed that a "gazettation" of seven years on the part of the Fund would help the city to accept and appreciate the art that had to live with the public, and there would be some relation between art and the public and the effect it has on public usage and ability to use the space that belongs to it. We'd like to use more appropriate place on the plaza. If the art is acceptable, it will damage the architecture.

But Mr. Thalacker sees the works removal, if that occurs, as damaging the program more. "It may have unfortunate ramifications in the agency's regional offices."

Mr. Diamond says that since the city has a very rich public art program, he expects that other works could be removed in other areas of the country. Since regional administrators have been given more authority by Washington, he notes, Art-in-Architecture budgets have been cut in Boston and in San Francisco. And in Atlanta, the city's art administrator, Donnell Johnson, citing the need for a different use of the space it occupies, recently offered "Christianity," a large site-specific work installed in a Federal building under the sculptor Lloyd Hamrol, to the High Museum of Art. The offer has been refused "as a matter of good faith" by director Guilmard Vigil and Peter Morrin, curator of 20th-century art, in a terse letter.

"A place for Art," the sculpture elsewhere," Mr. Morris wrote, "would negate the esthetic considerations upon which the work was based."

But the Serra work would also undermine artists' confidence in the program, Thalacker suggests: "They have always given generously of their time and money for these projects. The G.S.A. drives a hard bargain, and in most cases the fees paid to artists barely cover the cost of materials. If more was not paid, we professionals would do that. We've always been able to say it's the work and the project. What effect will this have on future commissions?"

This is by no means the first controversy that the Art-in-Architecture program has been embroiled in. Initiated in 1963 under the Kennedy administration, it was dormant from 1970 to 1983 because of the initiatives made for the audience that frequents museums.

"We do not want to create a system that排斥s the public," Thalacker said in 1986. "We do not want a system that works only for the artists themselves."

The graphic reference to the Kennedy assassination was read into it, and public protests brought about a suspension of the program in 1966. The program was revived in the mid-1970's, when a group of Federal Judges in Baltimore, already successful in blocking the installation of public art by George Sugarman on "security" grounds, i.e., that its presence would provide a shelter for bomb threats, already set out at street corners, agreed to support the work was expressed, the G.S.A. stood firm. The judges were not willing to have any more counterespionage, and there will certainly be more.

And presumably the Art-in-Architecture program will survive all this. The agencies concern with the task of broadening the audience for works of esthetic integrity, made by artists whose reputations are still understandable. The concept of "public" sculpture, which has brought art out of the sanitized environment of the galleries and into the gritty world of the streets, still cautiously generates controversy and controversy.

Whatever the outcome of the hearing, it will be about the necessary debate over the relationship of art to the needs and wants of local people.