

Bay Area takes taste test: Is it art or junk?

Castro Valley heeds public outcry; S.F. debates sculpture

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The masses have spoken.

It's the latest battle between the artistic community and the Regular Folks: Alameda County officials were forced by a deluge of public opinion to remove a multicolored aluminum welcome sign at Redwood Road and Castro Valley Boulevard.

Paid for with \$106,000 of public funds and in place barely two months, the sign was derided as an "artistic travesty," attracted a messy, food-throwing protest by listeners of KYLD-FM radio and brought 700 angry people to a town meeting last month.

"My gut reaction was, 'Oh my God, what is *that*?' " said Steven Dimick, a Castro Valley attorney whose office was directly across from the sign.

On Tuesday, the Board of Supervisors voted to remove the sign. It came down Thursday.

As more and more cities create public art programs, the controversies seem to grow louder than the colors
[See PUBLIC ART, A-16]



EXAMINER/CRAIG LEE

An Alameda County work crew dismantles this unwelcome Castro Valley sign. The multicolored aluminum sign was scorned by many residents who didn't see any beauty in it.

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Civic art often draws controversy

in a Mission District mural.

"We've been here a long time and this is probably the most outcry we've ever heard," said Bonnie Dettmer, executive director of the Castro Valley Chamber of Commerce. "People are very proud of their little community and felt (the sign) did not represent their community. They felt powerless."

They also felt nauseated, said resident Ken Carbone. Let artists display their creativity in galleries, he said, and put in public view the things people can agree on. "I don't think I have to drive down my street and get sick over it."

In San Francisco, critique of public art has in itself become something of an art form.

But the problem, according to artists and their supporters, is that many residents are simply not sophisticated enough to understand and appreciate great art.

Case in point: a proposed 48-foot metal sculpture by Richard Serra, slated for the Palace of the Legion of Honor in 1994 and hated by residents.

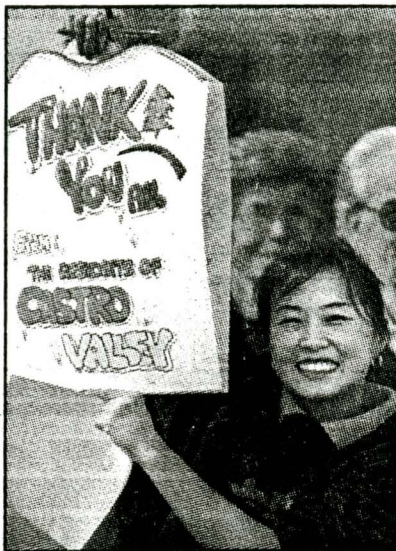
Serra is "noted worldwide as the greatest outdoor sculptor today," and he's a native of The City, said San Francisco Art Commission President Stanlee Gatti. But the public looked at his work and didn't see genius.

"They viewed it as a piece of steel that was being plopped down in the middle of a classical building," Gatti said.

Now the piece is on display in Germany, where it is "the talk of the town," Gatti said. "People really love it and appreciate it."

Sometimes, that appreciation can only come over time, Gatti said. Even the Statue of Liberty had its enemies when it was dedicated in 1884.

And another famous sculpture, the "Chicago Picasso" at the Richard J. Daley Plaza in Chicago, stirred an uproar in the late 1950s, when the idea for it was conceived, Gatti said.



EXAMINER/CRAIG LEE

Castro Valley resident Hannah Carbone holds a sign thanking county officials for taking down the \$106,000 welcome sign.

"They said, this is ridiculous. It's a piece of metal. This is scrap. We don't want it," Gatti said. "Today, it is one of the most famous sculptures in the world."

Whether the 18-foot-high sculp-

ture of a foot proposed for The Embarcadero will weather the storm of public criticism remains to be seen.

The \$500,000 project by Seattle artist Buster Simpson was opposed by 55 percent of respondents in a recent Examiner call-in survey, and the idea has prompted a deluge of calls to supervisors' offices.

The most recent idea put to an artistic "taste test" in San Francisco is a 28-foot stainless steel peace symbol, proposed to be built with private funds in the Panhandle.

On Thursday afternoon, the Recreation and Park Commission voted unanimously to approve the use of the space at the intersection of Oak and Masonic for a sculpture, though Supervisor Michael Yaki had asked for a postponement of the vote.

But the Art Commission should hold a separate hearing for the public to express concerns about the size and style of the artwork, said commissioner the Rev. Yvetter Flunder.

Critics have panned the peace sign as too large and unsightly. Art-

ist Tony Labat said Thursday he would not be opposed to making it smaller.

"Scale is important, but negotiable," said Labat, who teaches at the San Francisco Art Institute and was surrounded by supportive students at the meeting at McLaren Lodge in Golden Gate Park.

Rachel Ellis, a park volunteer who regularly cleans up the Panhandle, said she felt that sculpture was simply "not compatible with the naturalistic park land," and felt that if works of art were to be installed in the park, they should be confined to a sculpture garden.

Controversy alone isn't enough to deter many art supporters. In fact, it can be a badge of honor.

"The most successful public art programs in the country are those that have very bold statements and very diverse kinds of things," said Rich Newirth, director of cultural affairs for The City.

There are more than 200 so-called "percent for art" programs across the nation, Newirth said. They are usually funded by a certain percentage of a communi-

ty's public construction or capital improvements expenditures.

The San Francisco program began in the late 1960s and now devotes between \$1 million and \$2 million a year to art projects, Newirth said. Two percent of all civic construction costs are reserved for public art projects at the construction sites.

Though The City goes through an exhaustive process of reviewing artists' proposals and considering various ideas for public art projects, the artwork itself cannot be created by committee, Gatti said. To do so would strip it of its creativity and uniqueness.

"Artists are of the highest breed of human beings," Gatti said. They create beauty and embody honest expression, he said.

The people of Castro Valley had some honest expression of their own Thursday, as their "welcome" sign was taken down.

"It was like watching a parade," said Steven Huss, arts program director for Alameda County. "They were sitting on the sidewalk going, 'Yay!'"