



The Public Administration of Public Art: Situated Practices in Swedish Municipalities

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Abstract

Even though states support and administer public art programs all over the world, the public administration of public art is a close to non-existent topic in the public administration research literature. This article provides some first steps towards a scholarly engagement with public art in the field of public administration through a practice-centred grounded theory-inspired investigation into the situated everyday practices of public administration of public art in Swedish municipalities. The results evince that difficult challenges regarding artistic integrity, democratic influence and political accountability rarely emerge in pure form, but rather tend to appear on the stage of administrative everyday work entangled in mundane bureaucratic processes relating to public procurement laws, accounting rules and budgeting routines. It is therefore important to investigate the administration of public art as an ongoing world of practice in which action is always contextually and situationally specific.

Practical Relevance

- Any analysis of public art must take into consideration how public administration practices fundamentally influence the procurement and production of public artworks.
- The public administration of public art entails the ongoing management of numerous entangled issues requiring different types of skills and judgement. Therefore, it is best understood as a situated practice that is highly context-dependent.
- Swedish municipal practices for producing and managing public art include significant local variations that can have a substantial impact on the art that is produced.

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Introduction

In 2017 the proposal *Eternal employment* ("Evig anställning") won the competition for developing the public artwork in a new train station at Korsvägen in Gothenburg. The conceptual artwork proposed by artist duo *Goldin+Senneby* was centred around the employment of a person at the station. A changing room would also be installed at the station which would be reserved for this person, and special lighting above the train platforms would communicate to the travellers when the employed person was "on duty" and not. The employee would then freely decide whatever s/he was to do during her working days, and the outcome of these decisions would constitute the artwork. According to the jury statement the proposed artwork presented a "solid concept and an artistic expression of great quality, which would significantly broaden the field of artistic interventions in the public sphere" and conveyed "a complexity and a visionary quality that displayed an ability to develop over time, in future generations and in relation to the development of society"¹ (Statens konstråd & Trafikverket, 2017).

The funding for the ongoing employment would be secured through allocation of part of the budget into a new investment fund. The design was influenced by Thomas Piketty's claim that capital grows faster than wages in contemporary societies, leading to widening class divides. If the investment would fail the employment would be terminated. The proposed artwork generated extensive international media coverage. A debate emerged around the work, scrutinizing the intersections between aesthetics, ethics and politics (see further Karlholm, 2023). Then, after much ado, the planned artwork was formally cancelled in April 2022. However, the reason for this had nothing to do with art-theoretical controversies. Instead, the cancellation was caused by an administrative-technical detail relating to some formulations in *Kapitalförsörjningsförordningen*, the law which regulates the legitimate use of Swedish public funds. According to the law a Swedish government agency is not allowed to make payments to trust funds, which was the organizational form chosen by the artists. After some failed attempts at finding a different organizational form, the project was permanently abandoned.

The case of *Eternal employment* aptly illustrates how public art is a public practice not only in the sense of taking place in public space or facing an audience consisting of the general public – but also as being deeply entangled with the routines and organizational forms of public administration, with all its related preconditions, challenges and limitations. Studying the entanglement of public art and public administration is therefore crucial for understanding the fundamental conditions that influence the production and management of public art. The purpose of this article is to take a first step towards opening a scholarly discussion about these entanglements and their consequences. The specific empirical focus is on investigating the situated practices of navigating public administration procedures and regulations for those working with the public administration of public art.

The much-debated *Eternal employment* was commissioned by Public Art Agency Sweden, a well-funded and highly regarded national government agency that over the last decade has invested in public relations, knowledge formation and the dissemination of best practice. However, the bulk of Swedish public art is financed and commissioned at the municipal level (60% of all publicly commissioned art in Sweden 2020/2021 according to KRO, 2021:19, see also KRO, 2025); a vast and variegated body of artistic production belonging to the sphere of the mundane that has so far received little research attention. The focus of this article lies on these municipal practices of public art production, drawing on a rich empirical material consisting of documentation of a full-day workshop with public art professionals active in the municipal Swedish context. Based on this material this article presents a practice-focused grounded theory-inspired account of situated everyday public administrative practices for producing and managing public art. The analysis illustrates how public art is embedded in public administrative contexts, and how in the situated everyday administration of public art decisive societal questions regarding e.g. artistic freedom, local democracy, and the public value of art in practice almost always presented themselves entangled in mundane administrative issues concerning public procurement laws, accounting rules and budgeting routines.

Background: Public Art in the Swedish Governance Context

The foundations for contemporary Swedish cultural policy can be traced back primarily to the 1930's, and was an important component of the emerging social-democratic welfare state project (Harding, 2023; Larsson & Svenson, 2001). In the area of public art specifically, Public Art Agency Sweden (*Statens konstråd*) was formed as a national government agency in 1937, with the purpose of commissioning artworks that would serve to make good quality art available to citizens within their everyday environments. The formation of the agency closely related to the adoption of a national “Percent for Art”-legislation particularly geared towards public art, according to which 1% of the construction budgets for government buildings should be reserved for artistic decoration. This legislation was formally in effect until 1947, when it was instead replaced by a yearly budget allocation by the parliament (*Riksdag*), but was reintroduced as a normative (albeit non-binding) goal for national policy on “Designed Living Environment” (including public art) in 2018. Over the years the remit of Public Art Agency Sweden has broadened to include not only government buildings, but also state-supported housing areas, and from 1997 and onwards all types of public environments – which has also broadened the remit of direct collaboration with regional and municipal authorities across the country.²

With regards to decision-making processes for the allocation of public cultural funding in Sweden, including public art funding, these have generally been based on a profession-oriented ‘arm’s length distance’-model. According to this model, decision-making regarding choices of individual artworks and projects has generally been devolved to boards or committees in which artistic experts dominate (Mangset, 2009; Johannisson, 2009). This applies to the national as well as regional and municipal level of decision-making. However, in recent years this model has come under increased pressure (see further below).

A major reorganization of Swedish cultural policy occurred in 2011 when the “cultural collaboration model” of funding allocation was introduced, which entailed a decentralization and regionalization of cultural policy, within a broad framework set by national policy goals. The purpose of the reform was to increase democratic influence and local engagement in the distribution of cultural funding, but experiences in this regard have so far been mixed (see e.g. Lindqvist, 2019; Renko et al, 2022). It is important to note that public art only partially falls within the remit of the cultural collaboration model, and is mostly funded and commissioned outside of its scope. Consequently, national and regional government funding for public art today only constitutes a minor part of all commissioned public art. Instead, municipalities are by far the largest commissioners of public art in Sweden today (KRO, 2021, 2025).

Sweden’s 290 municipalities differ remarkably in size, from 2400 inhabitants in the least populous municipality (Bjurholm) to 978800 in the largest (Stockholm) in 2021. Although partially regulated by law, Swedish municipalities have great liberty to locally decide upon the scope of services provided, as well as how to organize the administration of those services. Even though some marginal systems of intermunicipal fiscal equalization exist, the relative prosperity of a local municipal administration is largely decided by the size and affluence of the local population. Beyond a requirement to provide access to public libraries Swedish municipalities have no formal obligations to provide cultural services. Following a post-welfare era tradition most municipalities nonetheless provide some culture offering, often also including public art – but there is significant variation in how and to what extent municipalities engage in the provision of public art. On the municipal level, Gotland municipality was the first to introduce a formal Percent for Art policy guideline in 1957, and a 2018 survey by the Swedish Arts Grants Committee (*Konstnärsnämnden*) evinced that 41% of Swedish municipalities and 55% of Swedish regions applied some form of Percent for Art funding principle, albeit with greatly variegated detailed policy stipulations regarding how the percent was calculated, what budget it was based on, and the types of costs it was used to cover (Konstnärsnämnden, 2020).

Analytical Framework

Public art is a contested and slippery concept (Nilsson, 2023a). Skirting the philosophical debates we will for pragmatic reasons in this paper define “public art” in accordance with the empirically-contextually well-established and policy-guiding definition provided by Public Art

Agency Sweden: "Public art is art of any media or technique displayed in the public realm or art that addresses issues of that which we share. Art can be an object and much more: it can be experiences, social interaction, critical and creative approaches. Similarly, the public realm is not only streets or squares but also social and mental public spaces, which emerge when we meet each other, exchange views and express feelings"³. Relatedly, while recognizing the great variety of competences and professions involved in the production and maintenance of public art, we in this paper use "public art professional" as a shorthand for those individuals who in one way or another derive their sustenance from professionally working with the management and administration of public art (as defined above). Although limiting, this definition is still broad and for instance includes both freelancing art consultants and permanently employed municipal administrators specialized in public art issues.

Scholarly debates concerning the definitions, rationales, and practices of public art have been lively in disciplines such as art theory, cultural geography, cultural sociology and cognate research fields (see e.g., Finkelppearl, 2000; Hall & Robertson, 2001; Kwon, 2002; Sharp et al, 2005; Cartiere & Willis, 2008; Schuermans et al, 2012; Cartiere & Zebracki, 2016; Knight & Senie, 2016; Cartiere & Tan, 2020; Matthews & Gadloff, 2022; Nilsson, 2023b). Research on public art in the field of public administration has been much less prevalent (Hunting, 2005; Smith, 2014). Even if meagre, the literature does illustrate the importance of paying attention to public administration regulations and practices to properly understand public art. In our review of the existing public administration research on public art we have found that the foci of this research generally can be organized into three primary themes: producing normative arguments for public art investment, investigating the management of controversies around public art, and studying how administrative practice impacts artistic practices in the production of public art. Additionally, the independent but with public administration partially overlapping research field of *cultural policy studies* encompasses a rich and topically highly relevant research literature. Therefore some key themes from this research tradition will also be included as components of the analytical framework.

Public art in public administration research

Normative arguments for public art investment

Some previous public administration studies openly normatively advocate for the importance of public art investment by arguing for the benefits that can be reaped from this (see e.g. Hunting, 2005; Smith, 2014). With such an approach, it becomes important to be able to prove the societal value of art. Along these lines, Hunting (2005:6) suggests that the dilemma facing public art is how to quantify the effectiveness of interventions whose primary outputs are intangible values which go beyond superficial or coarse indicators such as attendance figures. Instead, he argues, the crucial but more difficult task is to measure effect in a way that values both the process and the product, particularly in relation to innovative forms of public art such as participant- and process-focused artworks.

Smith (2014) is even more straightforward in his propagation for public art spending when invoking the "Guggenheim effect" (Plaza, Tironi, & Haarich, 2009) to argue for the tangible benefits of local public art investment. He further suggests that public art can also contribute to both tourist attractivity, attractive public spaces, residents' well-being, place attachment and increased social cohesion (Smith, 2014:11). Compared to Smith, Senie's (2003) argument is more guarded, stressing that even though public art can offer many local benefits, it cannot compensate for failure to address societal challenges through means of adequate funding and relevant programs in e.g. public education and healthcare. "Yet", she remarks, "these unreasonable expectations are often implicit or imbedded in the commissioning of public art", thus setting it up with unrealistic expectations that inevitably lead towards disappointment (Senie, 2003:4).

The management of controversies regarding public art

Focusing on the dynamics of controversy relating to public artworks and the role of public administrations in such situations, Balfe & Wyszomirski (1986) discuss the scandal surrounding Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* in Lower Manhattan (see also Dubin, 1985; Senie, 2003; Hunting,

2005; Smith, 2014). Through this case, Balfe & Wyszomirski examine the complex interplay of legal, political, and aesthetic issues in public art. They develop a model for accommodating different interests in such processes and for managing related controversies. The model centres around three categories of actors, each with their own interests: (1) the artists who according to them “desire artistic freedom, recognition, and security for their work”, (2) the commissioning public agency, “which is responsible for the promotion of the long-term aesthetic welfare of society, while confronting immediate political and procedural constraints upon its actions”, and (3) the public, “which must assent to the funding and give community acceptance to the particular works installed in its midst” (Balfe & Wyszomirski 1986:5).

The impact of administrative practice on artistic practice

Focusing more on mundane public-administrative aspects, Mankin (2002) investigated the practices of managing public art in US university campuses. He suggests that some of the key aspects regarding the administration of public art relate to sources of funding, decision structure for the selection of public art, the organization of tendering and project management, and monitoring and maintenance of public art. Smith (2014) also stresses the importance of attending to the everyday practice of public art administration. He discusses the skill set needed to work with public art in public administration contexts, suggesting that key issues relate to project selection, siting and maintenance (Smith 2014:12). Smith further suggests that the timing and funding of maintenance is often not addressed in project commissioning, which tends to create challenges later on (Smith 2014:12-13). Smith also argues that an important factor influencing the outcome of public art commissioning is the organizational location of public art management within a public administration, as well as the organization of the funding base, and whether the art competence in the administration is permanently employed or tendered (Smith 2014:13).

In the existing literature, Dubin (1985) presents the most detailed investigation of the effects of mundane administrative practices. His article focuses on conflicts between public administrators and artists in a city administration-run Artist-in-Residence programme (AIR) in Chicago between 1978-1981. Dubin’s article painstakingly describes the challenges that arose in the ongoing practical interpretation of goals, policy frameworks, and routines of the local administration managing the programme. Dubin argues that the administrative-organizational context of AIR fundamentally shaped the art that was produced within the programme. Dubin observes that the artists were pressured to alter their work habits to fit with the bureaucratic expectations and requirements (Dubin 1985:283). The content and form of artistic production was steered towards what administrators imagined to be “what the public wanted”. This forced artists to decide whether they were willing to yield to organizational demands. Those who failed to do so were sidelined in consequent rounds of funding (Dubin 1985:277). This Dubin defines as a “triumph of organizational over individual needs” (Dubin 1985: 278).

To round off the discussion of the existing literature on public art as a public administration practice, Dubin shows how administrative structures and logics create the preconditions for artistic practice in the context of public administration. Dubin’s account aptly illustrates the importance of paying critical attention to not only capital “P” politics relating to large open controversies around public art, but to also remain attuned to the minor “p” administrative politics consisting of everyday struggles, strategizing, and coping practices of those working with public art-related issues in and around public administrations.

Cultural policy studies research

Cultural policy studies (CPS) is a vibrant and highly pluralistic research community with overlaps to many other disciplines and fields (Gray, 2010; O’Brien, 2014; see also the contributions in Durrer et al, 2018 for illustration).⁴ One of these cognate fields is public administration research (Paquette & Redaelli, 2015; Paquette & Beauregard, 2018) and there is a large body of existing work in CPS that is of relevance to the present study, particularly with regards to a contextual understanding of more general conditions of cultural production and cultural policies in Sweden specifically, and in the Nordic countries more broadly.

Within the context of CPS many of the themes identified in the previous research on public administration of public art have been longstanding topics of interest, generating nuanced and

sophisticated analyses. For example, the question of how to assess (or even if one should assess) the value of culture has been a foundational debate including seminal work by e.g. Bille Hansen (1995), Throsby (2003), and Belfiore (2004). Other important discussions in the field center around the preconditions for cultural production in different institutional contexts (see e.g. Giardina & Rizzo, 1994; Kangas & Vestheim, 2010; Mulcahy, 2017; Durrer et al, 2019). One such important institutional factor that has been debated in CPS is the application of different forms of the so-called “arm’s length principle” in the allocation of cultural funding (Taylor, 1997; Mangset, 2009; Blomgren, 2012; Larsen et al, 2022). According to this principle public art funding should not be allocated directly by elected politicians, but rather by an intermediary funding distributor, so as to guarantee that funding is allocated purely on grounds of artistic quality and to avoid that funds are directed towards fulfilling other political goals. The distribution of funding on grounds of ‘artistic quality’ however opens up the questions as to how this is defined, and by whom (see e.g. Gilmore et al, 2017; Lewandowska & Smolarska, 2020). Also, important research in the field has focused on an identified (but also disputed) movement towards an increased instrumentalization of cultural policy, that is: an observation that cultural production is not funded by states in its own right, but to the extent to which it is expected to contribute to the fulfillment of other policy goals, such as economic growth, urban attractiveness, integration, local democracy, etc. (see e.g. Vestheim, 1994; Belfiore, 2004; Gray, 2007; Kann-Rasmussen, 2024).

Relating specifically to the Nordic context, which includes Sweden, important work within CPS has identified a “Nordic cultural policy model” which primarily took shape in the 1960s-1980s as part of the development of the Nordic welfare states (Duelund, 2003; Mangset et al, 2008; Lindsköld & Ejgod Hansen, 2024). Some of the identified main shared characteristics of this model include a relatively generous amount of state funding for culture, allocation of funds according to different versions of the arm’s length principle, an ambition to ‘democratize culture’ and provide equal access to high-quality culture to all geographical localities and segments of the population, and finally decentralized policy delivery within a centralized national policy framework.

It has been observed that a major shift occurred in Nordic countries from the 1970’s and onwards, away from what was criticized as a paternalistic program of ‘bringing high-brow culture to the masses’ (democratization of culture paradigm) towards an increased support and encouragement for popular, alternative and ‘low-brow’ cultural expressions (cultural democracy paradigm). The tension between these two goals has been identified as a defining feature of Nordic cultural policies from thereon (Skot-Hansen, 1999; Johannisson, 2010). The model itself is today considered to be considerably weakened due to challenges from the late 20th century and onwards inspired by neoliberalism, New Public Management and other policy currents, which have contributed to an increased overt instrumentalization of culture (Mangset et al, 2008; Stenström, 2008; Vestheim, 2009). In her study of local cultural policy work in the City of Gothenburg around the year 2000, Johannisson (2006) identified three concomitantly circulating influential discourses, which clearly map onto these different waves of policy influences. The “quality discourse” emphasized the importance of supporting the professional creation of artistically qualitative cultural production, the “welfare discourse” focused on the importance of broadening participation in cultural activities, and the “alliance discourse” was more market-oriented and focused on the contribution of culture to economically and environmentally sustainable development. In her work, Johannisson shows how the incongruences between these discourses to some extent allow for hybridization, but also generates frictions in the concrete everyday practice of cultural policy work.

A recently observed trend in Nordic CPS is the increasingly intense political questioning of the neutrality of elite and professional definitions of artistic quality and ‘high-quality’ culture, which can be read as a sign of an increased politicization of the realm of cultural production and consumption in the Nordic countries. Karlsson (2003) already showed that the apprehension that cultural policy in Sweden was a policy area shaped by a general political consensus, and thus largely ‘apolitical’, to some extent was always a myth. However, in recent years the field has become more explicitly politicized, with traditional arm’s length models increasingly questioned both from the left and right sides of the political spectrum. Pressure from the left has

coalesced around demands of increased diversity, inclusion and/or importance of taking into account popular cultural expressions, whereas from the far right ‘culture wars’ policy mobilizations have focused on questioning the influence of what is perceived to be left-leaning cultural elites’ unduly privileged cultural hegemony (Harding, 2022; Jakonen et al, 2025).

Materials and Methods

Methodological approach

This article aligns with the existing research agenda investigating the situated everyday practice of public administration (Lipsky, 1980; Wagenaar, 2004; Frederickson et al, 2015; Feldman & Worline, 2016) by inquiring into practitioners’ situated experiences, practical knowledge, and how public administrators “do what they do” and “make decisions in particular situations” (Elías, 2022:70; see further Wagenaar, 2004). Through such research, knowledge can be developed about “questions that practitioners deem central to their work” (Elías, 2022:70) while also highlighting how “[t]he ends that bureaucrats inherit, even at the street level, are typically underdeterminate, and bureaucrats must uphold a range of process values that often conflict”, which in turn “yields considerable scope for value-laden discretionary judgment in the routine of everyday work” (Zacka, 2022:34). Also research in CPS has stressed the importance of a context- and space/place-sensitive approach that focuses on the execution of cultural policy, so as to be able to increase understandings of actors’ exercise of situated judgement in the concrete practicing of cultural policy (Johannisson, 2009, 2010; Haugsevje et al, 2016; Jakonen & Sokka, 2023; Sitas, 2023; Henningsen & Røyseng, 2025).

A research field that has specialized in studying situated professional practice is the interdisciplinary research field of practical knowledge studies. Research in practical knowledge aims at uncovering and increasing understandings of experiences and skills that are difficult to strictly codify or manualize, with a particular focus on different kinds of professional knowledge (Cederberg et al, 2023; Bornemark & Svenaeus, 2009). The field is methodologically open (Fuglseth, 2023) but is dominated by research practices that in different ways actively involve the research subjects’ reflection over their own practices (Schwarz, 2019). The two dominant methodological approaches are reflexive writing and dialogue seminars (Gunnarsson, 2019). The seminars that constitute the basis for the empirical material analysed in this paper (see further details below) were inspired by the latter approach, although they were considerably simplified compared to the elaborate methodological format that has evolved over time within the context of studies in practical knowledge.⁵ On the basis of the insights we present in this paper we nonetheless argue that even a less elaborate seminar methodology can fulfil the purpose of evoking unarticulated knowledge that goes beyond generic descriptions of practices and instead “makes visible and addresses the fields of tension inscribed in practice” (Bornemark, 2019:72 [translated from Swedish]).

A Ground Theory (GT) inspired approach was employed to analyse the accounts of situated practice that were articulated in the workshops. It has been argued that the type of empirically grounded qualitative research approach that GT represents is particularly well-suited for studying situated practice by way of investigating studying practitioners’ own working experiences (Elías, 2022). As noted by Corley (2015:601), “[t]he heart and soul of GT methodologies lies in *engaging a phenomenon from the perspective of those living it*, which means it is most suited toward inductive examinations seeking deep insight into a phenomenon and its connections with the context”.

GT is generally considered particularly suitable for exploratory research regarding areas or issues in which previous scholarly work is meagre (Makri & Neely, 2021; Hafer, 2022), such as is the case regarding research on the situated practice of public art professionals. The purpose of GT is to generate empirically grounded generalizations about a particular issue, process or practice within a specific setting. In this article, the purpose of employing GT is not to produce a fully-fledged substantive theory of public administration of public art, let alone a formal such theory. Instead, the aim is to embark on some initial steps in a broader collective-abductive process towards an empirically grounded theorization of public administration practices relating

to public art “in the context of discovery” (Swedberg, 2012; Ashworth et al, 2019; Makri & Neely, 2021).

The GT field is constituted by partially conflicting schools of research with diverging ontological and methodological tenets (see e.g., Glaser, 1998; Makri & Neely, 2021; Hafer, 2022). The major identifiable such schools of GT are those following Glaser & colleagues’ “classic” GT approach, which emphasises the importance of remaining focused on emergent patterns in the research data (e.g. Glaser, 1998); those who agree with Strauss & colleagues who emphasize the importance of rigor and systematicity in analysis (e.g. Strauss & Corbin, 1997); and those who align with the more recently developed constructivist approach, focused more on the socially constructed and context-dependent nature of meaning and relevance (e.g. Charmaz, 2006).

As is common in the application of GT, this paper’s does not fully align with any of the clearly articulated schools of GT but rather takes inspiration from both the Glaserian “classic” and constructivist strands of GT (Corley, 2015:601). This bespoke treatment of GT is also supported by state-of-the-art discussions of the methodology, according to which “being open and flexible is more important than following a pre-specified sequence of steps and guidelines” (Makri & Neely, 2021:8). Some of the most important methodological commitments derived from classic & constructivist GT applied in this study include: 1) an ambition to minimize theory-grounded preconceptions regarding the preconditions and character of the investigated practice; 2) to as large an extent as possible strive towards an open and inductive coding process that allows for patterns to emerge from the data itself and allowing for an iterative refinement of the coding schema, rather than imposing pre-defined categories and themes upon the data; 3) not to obfuscate or exclude divergent experiences and opinions, ambiguities and dilemmas – but rather to make room for a polyphony of individual voices and allow discrepancies to nuance the research results.

Methods and materials

This article is primarily based upon transcribed recordings of a workshop in Sweden in the autumn of 2021. The workshop was arranged as an activity within the research project *Positions in the political economy of art*, funded by the FORMAS Research Council (grant #2020-02455). The design of the workshops was inspired by studies in practical knowledge, particularly the dialogue seminar format (see above). In line with this, the purpose of the workshop was to create a space that facilitates articulation of and reflection over experiences of situated professional practice of public art professionals active on the municipal level in Sweden.

The workshop was planned as an in-person event, but due to Covid-19 it was moved online. 16 persons actively participated in the workshop. The workshop participants consisted of practitioners working with procurement and/or management of public art in a Swedish municipal context, either as employees or consultants. Although the research did not include a documentation of the participants’ educational background, the workshop discussions evinced that some of the participants were trained as public administrators, others had a background as practicing artists, and some were educated in other professions such as architecture, landscape architecture or museum management. This aptly illustrates the diversity of backgrounds of those working as public art professionals in Sweden today. Due to privacy commitments it is not possible to share detailed characteristics of the workshop participants, but *Table 1* presents a general overview of the geographical character of their working environment, as well as their formal professional role. The table also includes the identification tags for direct quotes in the paper in the format “I#[x]”.

Table 1: Workshop participants & quote identification tags.

Municipality type	Professional title	Quote identification tag
Rural/semi-rural	Cultural secretary	I#1
Metropolitan suburb	City architect	I#2
Mid-sized city (~100-150k inhabitants)	Curator of public art	I#3
Rural/semi-rural	Cultural secretary	I#4
Mid-sized city (~100-150k inhabitants)	Curator, public art & municipal art collection	I#5
Mid-sized city (~100-150k inhabitants)	Process manager, new public art	I#6
Metropolitan centre	Curator of public art	I#7
Mid-sized city (~100-150k inhabitants)	Curator, public art	I#8
Mid-sized city (~100-150k inhabitants)	Curator, municipal art museum & OIC public art	I#9
Rural/semi-rural	Officer in Charge of art	I#10
Metropolitan centre	Manager of unit of public art	I#11
Mid-sized city (~100-150k inhabitants)	Project manager public art	I#12
Rural/semi-rural	Manager of municipal art museum	
Rural/semi-rural	Cultural developer / Cultural educator	
Rural/semi-rural	City architect	
Mid-sized city (~100-150k inhabitants)	Architect, manager of architectural programme (incl public art)	

The full-day workshop (10-16.30) consisted of three thematic discussion sessions of 45 minutes each and three 30-minute moderated plenary session that reflected on the preceding discussions. For the thematic sessions participants were divided into smaller groups of 3-5 persons. These sessions were focused around the themes *What can an artist do?*; *How does public art come about?*; *Why is public art important?*. The topics were selected by the research group in order to provide impetus for discussions on what the researchers expected to be key aspects of the public art professionals' practice. For each session, a set of questions to inspire discussions was also provided. However, there was no requirement of participants to address these questions, and they were free to discuss along the lines of what they considered to be relevant within the broader context.⁶

All workshop discussions were recorded and transcribed in full.⁷ The workshop transcripts amount to a total material of 45425 words. In accordance with GT the analysis of the material was initially performed through manual emergent open coding. Following the suggestion of Bryant (2017) we have attempted to follow Charmaz's (2006: 49) coding guidelines which aim to preserve GTs character as an open and flexible methodology (see also Corley, 2015): *remain open, stay close to data, keep your codes simple and precise, preserve actions, compare data with data, and move quickly through the data.*

The researchers involved in the study have all been previously involved with public art in Sweden, either as researchers, practitioners, or a combination of both. Consequently, we all inevitably had a degree of preconception of the field. From a purist GT perspective this is not an ideal situation. As a measure to partly counteract this and remain as open as possible to emergent themes in the material the coding and initial analysis was performed by the research team members with the least amount of specialized knowledge regarding public art in Sweden or academic research about public art, but with a strong experience in qualitative social science analysis. To prevent the imposition of our pre-conceived ideas about the field we strove to employ a high degree of reflexivity within the research process. In the coding process we explicitly attempted to 'bracket out' our preunderstanding of the field, while remaining acutely aware that this can never be fully achieved, particularly considering that the provided discussion

questions for the workshop were based on some of the research team members' prior understanding of key themes in the professional and academic fields of public art.

In the first iteration of open coding 13 main codes were identified and briefly summarized in coding memos, in accordance with GT methodology.⁸ A second iteration of coding synthesized these into eight broader coding themes.⁹ The coded material was consequently presented to other project members who partook in the workshops who were invited to suggest alternative interpretations and categorizations of the material, and/or to validate the relevance and plausibility of the suggested categories and interpretations. The review verified the validity of the analysis, and no consequent adjustment of the categories was deemed necessary.

In accordance with "classic" GT methodology, the existing academic literature on public art as a public administration practice was thoroughly reviewed only after completing the empirical analysis. In the finished article all direct quotations have been translated from Swedish by the authors.

Results

For the sake of simplicity we have structured the presentation of results in accordance with the recognized three main phases of Swedish public administration decision-making: *preparation* ('beredning'), *decision* ('beslut'), and *execution* ('genomförande'). In addition to issues relating to these phases, many discussions also centred around the overarching conditions for public art in different types of municipal settings. We have therefore also added a section on *Preconditions*.

Preconditions

Different realities

Swedish municipalities differ between themselves not only regarding the absolute and relative size of funding they provide for public art, but also in how the administrative work of commissioning and managing public art is organized. Municipalities are, with some limitations, free to decide how they divide responsibilities between different departments and elected boards. Some municipalities have an elected board of culture that makes decisions on public art. Some place these responsibilities on the board of public works or urban development; others have delegated it to the local museum or public gallery. In smaller municipalities where investments in public art are rare, it may be that the city council itself takes all decisions on these matters. As explained by one participant who works in a small Swedish municipality, the committee that deals with public art in her municipality also handles issues relating to local business development, tourism and civil society in general: "we have a lot on our plate: from transport infrastructure and public transport to fibreoptic cables – and art, and all those things" [I#1].

Another difference is the degree to which competence regarding public art is retained in-house or procured from consultants. Some municipalities have a large permanent staff working with public art, sometimes with quite strong decision-making autonomy – while other have no permanent employees with such expertise. Further, some municipalities have binding policy documents that regulate how they work with public art. Others are guided by informal routines or ad-hoc solutions concerning who is involved and in which ways.

With regards to funding, some municipalities have fixed budgets that are decided by the municipal council on a yearly basis. As previously mentioned, many municipalities have some form of "Percent for Art" -policy in place. However, a recurrent question that has arisen locally in municipalities given the non-existent legal codification is: "*one percent, of what?*". Most municipalities that employ such a principle base the 'one percent' on the budgets allocated for municipal infrastructure and property development. But the specificities vary greatly. One workshop participant explained that in her municipality the "one percent rule" did not apply when the municipality commissioned public spaces such as a square, park or road environment – only for public buildings. And out of that percent, wages for the administrative staff were also deducted. Another participant intimated that she wasn't even entirely sure what was the basis for calculating the "one percent". This was managed by a financial controller in another

department, who occasionally transferred pots of money for public art spending. A third participant also remarked that while her municipality employed a “one percent rule” for all new municipal buildings, this did not matter much since the municipality hadn’t commissioned any new buildings in years. Another divergence related to whether the “one percent”-funds had to be earmarked for public art in the specific projects from which they were derived, or whether this money could be shifted around to finance public art investments in other areas of the municipality where the need was seen to be greater.

We were expecting to hear lament in the workshop regarding a lack of funding for public art. Participants representing smaller municipalities also expressed envy towards more ambitiously spending local administrations. Somewhat more surprisingly, too *much* money was also repeatedly mentioned as a problem – particularly when there was a lack of organizational capacity to facilitate efficient use of funds. A repeatedly mentioned challenge was when municipal political leaders for one reason or another unexpectedly decided to make increased funds available. This challenge was particularly manifest in municipalities where the level of financing was tied to the realization of specific construction projects. If the municipality suddenly decided upon a major property investment, a large pot of money would suddenly materialize with short notice, and with this an attached expectation to immediately put this money to work. This uneven supply of funds generates an organizational stress and makes it difficult to scale the size of the staff appropriately. [I#3] works as an art superintendent in a mid-sized Swedish town that has recently implemented a one percent rule and suddenly have an abundance of funds for public art. To deal with this, the administration has hurriedly begun buying artworks “off the shelf” without a continuous dialogue with the responsible politicians. This generated frictions, but [I#3] reflects that “this is simply the only way that we can spend this money so that it doesn’t go to waste. If we don’t spend it this year, we might not be allowed to retain it the next”.

Following the above, it is thus important to point out that it is not only the level of funding that affects how public art spending is administered in Swedish municipalities, but also how it is organized. This for instance relates to the degree of discretion of moving funds between projects when applying some form of ‘one percent-rule’ and the uneven flow of funds that can result from such a financing structure.

Great expectations

Another important precondition for public art administration in Swedish municipalities concerns the political goals that public art is expected to fulfil. Since Swedish municipalities are not required by law to fund public art and generally have a strained financial situation, it is expectable that discussions arise regarding the ‘utility’ of investing public funds in art, when the money could potentially instead be allocated to e.g. local childcare or care for the elderly. As frustratingly expressed by one participant: “it’s the eternal demand to respond to: ‘oh, over there is a teacher’s yearly salary hanging from the ceiling” [I#4].

The workshop evinced that practitioners themselves mull over these questions in private. But such questions are also manifest in public debates in their working environments, particularly in the form of critical points raised by local politicians. Many of the more experienced practitioners told of work environments increasingly characterized by a narrowly instrumental understanding of the value of art. Public art is for instance expected to contribute to a sense of safe local environments through e.g. providing good lighting. One practitioner recounted how they commissioned a light artwork, but in the end the responsible politicians were not satisfied that it provided quite enough lighting to make the surroundings feel secure: “we have worked a lot with light-based art, that light is a carrying artistic element in the artwork – but it doesn’t serve to illuminate all the football pitches, so that was a disappointment. One politician was very disappointed that it only glowed a little bit at the top of the mast” [I#2]. Laconically she added: “perhaps it would then have been better to invest that money in street lighting”.

[I#2]’s reflection above touches upon some fundamental issues relating to public art: should public art be evaluated only on artistic criteria, whether it is good art or not – or also according to other criteria of public utility, such as whether it contributes to good playing environments, public safety, or economic growth? The practitioners need to constantly navigate these issues in

the context of a complex discursive landscape in which different funding programmes attach different broader policy demands to the evaluation of the proposed artworks. At the same time, other participants reflect that it is difficult to find the time to engage at all in discussions about such matters of principle when they are busy keeping their head above the water, as expressed for instance by [I#7]: “as a public administrator you are so into the practical issues, organizational issues – but the big questions you would really want to... considering the political climate, one would like to be better at formulating the value of art – we don’t have time for that. It’s all about evaluations, finances, contracts” [I#7]. We are now going to look a bit closer at these latter issues that appear to be at the top of practitioners’ minds.

Preparation

Conflicting competences

According to the established work schema of Swedish municipal administration, the preparation phase is when public administrators perform the work necessary for elected representatives to be able to make informed decisions on matters within their responsibility. This may sound straightforward, but practically involves a plethora of different types of administrative work and great degrees of freedom in how that work is organized and performed.

To begin with, a recurrently (but not always) present competence in municipalities is that of the “public art bureaucrat”. A very manifest attitude among the participants in our workshop, who mostly could be positioned within this category, was that even if they are art *bureaucrats*, they are also *art* bureaucrats – implying that they are in possession of a specialist expertise beyond that of the generic municipal bureaucrat. A recurrent theme in the conversations was the importance of being respected for their sometimes-questioned professionalism. One participant drew an analogy to her neighbour who is a medical doctor: “nobody comes up to him and says, ‘well why do you sit there and decide what kind of medicine I should take, I also want to have an opinion on that and prescribe it myself’” [I#11]. This is, however, part of the everyday reality of the art bureaucrat. Workshop participants relayed experiences of being attacked for only propagating their “taste” in art, but repeatedly asserted that they possess a particular professional expertise that goes beyond the realm of personal preference. Participants forcefully argued that they do have the experience and training to judge “artistic quality”, which comes across as an important component of their self-image. As expressed by one participant: “we have to stand steady on this, because otherwise we are replaceable and meaningless” [I#3]. Participants repeatedly argued that their professional evaluations of proposed projects can be clearly differentiated from their own likings in art.

The ethos of the public art bureaucrat that becomes discernible is further founded upon a norm which expects that the public should have an influence on the design of their local environments and the local politicians should be accountable decision-makers who can assume responsibility for their decisions. The role of the art bureaucrat, meanwhile, was articulated as upholding a responsibility to protect the integrity of artistic practice: “[I] must defend the artistic choices against other municipal departments, against civil society, against politics, so in this field you’re like attacked from all directions – but should act as a shield for the artist. I’m the one who is supposed to defend [the integrity of the art], not the artist. It’s my job” [I#5].

Arguing for the value of the expertise of the art bureaucrat was perceived to be at its most challenging in relating to local politicians and the public, which will be returned to below. But – as suggested by the quote above – the cooperation with other municipal service specialists can also be a challenge for the public art bureaucrat. The difficult communication between artistic expertise and technical experts responsible for the development of local public environments – such as architects, landscape architects or engineers – was a recurrent theme in the workshop:

In our municipality there has been some opposition from the department of urban development regarding what places are suitable for art. And we’ve found that quite difficult, because in the end we have the same mission, to build a [good] city, even if we have partially different foci. But we’ve felt slightly thwarted by them saying: ‘no, in the tunnels there shouldn’t be art’, ‘no, in an industrial park there shouldn’t be art’, and that comes to bear quite heavily. Sometimes they perhaps [even] own or manage the land. These aren’t controversies, but it’s a pity when we strive towards the same goal, and then someone comes in and dictates where one can have art and not, when it is perhaps only grounded in their idea about what is appropriate. [I#8]

A related question was that of timing: at what point the art experts are allowed into the urban development process influences how well they can integrate the art into the environment. As expressed by a participant, there is a difference between “when we *should* be invited” and “when we *must* be invited”: “sometimes it works and sometimes it is forgotten, and then I have to go to some meeting where everyone is sitting around being ashamed, and I’m really angry” [I#5].

Navigating regulations

The introduction of the Swedish *Public Procurement Act* (“Lagen om offentlig upphandling”) from 2016 which regulates how Swedish public authorities are allowed to purchase goods and services, appears to have had significant impact on how public art is administered in Swedish municipalities. The application of this law was a recurrent topic for debate in the workshop. One participant conveyed that the most infected controversy she had experienced did not relate to aesthetics but rather concerned the protocol for performing an administratively correct procurement. She commented that: “we don’t really know what to do according to the law, or – we know – but it’s a very demanding work procedure” [I#6]. [I#7] further notes that “To work in a political organization with legally regulated procurement – that’s a lot to deal with for a project manager. To be a support for the artist, to promote that it can work as freely as possible, and at the same time to be mindful of all that you have to take care of in the role of procurer. It’s really a balancing act”.

Overall, the application of the law is experienced as cumbersome and ill-fitted to art-related processes, both when it comes to procuring artworks and designing call-for-tenders for contracting consultants. One main issue that came up concerned how a tightly regulated procurement procedure risked circumscribing artistic creativity. Participants argued that quality art must allow for a margin of uncertainty, that something unexpected will emerge – which was considered to be contrary to the procurement regulations. [I#5] noted that serendipitous creative artistic processes sometimes demand some flexibility. On one occasion a contracted artist chose to change the exact siting of a commissioned artwork: “And one can discuss whether that is really ok in relation to the procurement regulations, but we nonetheless arrived at the conclusion that this idea was much better than what we asked for in the project brief” [I#5].

Decision

How long should an arm be?

The concrete decision-making process for procurement of public artworks can look very different in different Swedish municipalities. Often responsible public servants have a high degree of discretion below a certain monetary threshold, but decisions on major investments are taken directly by elected local politicians in either a municipal board or the municipal council. Many municipalities appoint ad-hoc expert juries for evaluating project proposals, whereas other have standing committees. In some municipalities the committees which make decisions (or often, formally, recommendations) regarding specific projects also include local politicians.

Overall, the degree to which the local politicians are actively involved in decision-making regarding individual art projects varies greatly. That the structure of the arm’s length system remains legally uncoded is a source of friction and conflict. So what’s an optimally long arm? In some municipalities, individual projects are heatedly debated in municipal council, whereas in other cases the administrators just hand in a list of all the projects they’ve completed during the year, which the politicians then summarily “rubber stamp”. One participant expressed pride at having “a long arm towards politics” [I#5], whereas another countered that having too much distance is also a problem, since that erodes legitimacy in relation to the general public: “it functions a bit as a shield for the public servant when they are criticized by [the local inhabitants], then you can say ‘well, it is your elected politicians who have actually decided this!’” [I#3]. According to the practitioners it seems that there is a critical zone not too close to politics, but neither too far away either – in which there is room for professional art expertise to have an impact, but at the same time not alienating the local politicians who in the end bear the final responsibility.

Overall, participants nonetheless seemed to feel that it is more problematic when the politicians are too “meddlesome” rather than too passive. [I#9] tells of a recent episode in which

a local politician began to argue for the benefit of a specific artistic expression in a planned tunnel walkway. [I#9] sees this type of direct political advocacy for specific motifs or expressions as deeply problematic:

We shouldn't be doing the art. We shouldn't be thinking about exactly what it should depict, we should merely show that this site exists, and then we should find an artist through the LOU [procurement law] procedure, who is prepared to design the artwork, and it decides exactly where in the site the artwork would be placed and which material, technique and type of artwork this should be. I find this a challenge – to have this dialogue, but at the same time be able to say that 'up to here, but not further'. [I#9]

[I#9] explains that she tries to shield the selection process from direct political influence, but admits that pressures nonetheless tend to seep in, all the way to the artists proposals themselves: "these voices that can be heard in the political sphere of course affect the artists' proposals – because if you've heard that 'this municipalities likes this or that', this of course affects the resultant proposals" [I#9].

The engaged public and the power of the bureaucrat

It also became evident that the relationship between public art bureaucrats and elected local politicians is not a bipolar field of tension. An important third pole in this decision-making forcefield is that of the local public. In the discussion the relationship between these three actor-categories comes across as deeply complex, dynamic and locally variegated. Many of the participants expressed themselves positively about engagement of local residents, but it was repeatedly also stressed that promoting involvement shouldn't equate with completely surrendering decision-making power to lay representatives. Rather, it was argued, the choice of artwork should be the result of a well-managed process in which art expertise and local opinion arrives at a common idea through deliberation, and where the experts curate the process to ensure the artistic quality of the final product. Uninvited engagement from individual opinionated residents was however not positively viewed. Pressure from vociferous individuals and small groups with strong opinions on what constitutes good art can generate tangible pressure and were recognized to have an impact on decision-making, particularly considering that these opinions were generally categorized as artistically "regressive" or "reactionary".

In addition to the above, one workshop participant describes that citizen participation can also be utilized strategically, to prepare the ground and "anchor" an artwork in a local community context, as well as pre-emptively protect a potentially controversial artwork from political attacks:

We've begun to work a lot with murals. And there, also a little bit to protect ourselves and protect the artists, we've begun to work co-creatively. Because it is kind of difficult to say: 'what kind of shit is this!' if the local youth has been part of it. Because, it was a couple of years back it was a lot of... a great deal of discussion regarding what type of art we have [...] and to get the people in and not receive so much criticism, and to be able to work with what we wanted and get the artists we wanted we have attempted to work with co-creative processes in different ways. [I#10]

However, it isn't always so easy for the art bureaucrat to steer these processes. Introducing the public into the decision-making process inevitably generates uncertainties. One participant who works in a municipality where the standard routine is to assemble reference groups with residents for each project, described a great deal of discomfort in situations where the divergence between the positions of the art professionals and local residents becomes too manifest. In the end it would be the professionals that get the last word, but this means that the local opinion is problematically overruled. Since this would be politically difficult, the participant describes that she often feels that her "hands are tied" in these groups, and that she is required to fold to local pressure and make artistically less well-considered choices.

This leads into the thorny issue of the power of the art bureaucrat, an obviously sensitive question that was repeatedly touched upon. Overall, the most articulated and least controversial bureaucratic role that came up in the discussions was that of "the educator". It was repeatedly stated by different participants that municipal art bureaucrats have a responsibility to be "pedagogic" with the public and local politicians and to "inform" and "train them" regarding aesthetic values that they may spontaneously not understand how to appreciate – as well as to stress and explain the importance of artistic freedom. Another commonly posited role was that

of the “judicious mediator”, as eloquently conceptualized by one participant who describes her position between two “bubbles”: on the one side the world of politics, law and local opinion, and on the other side artistic freedom, arguing that the role of the art bureaucrat is to “import as much as we can from the one bubble and filter it in a way that maximizes the freedom of the artist while still taking these other things into consideration” [I#11]. She further describes this as a balancing act: “if there is too much weight on one side no one will understand all these great ideas [behind the artwork], and if there is too much in the other it becomes superficial, and everyone can just go along thinking: ‘Oh, that’s colourful and fun’ while walking past it. There must be a balance” [I#11].

Overall, the participants stressed the importance of being scrupulously professional in their role as civil servants, but some self-critical remarks also came up. One participant commented that “we talk a lot about political control, but civil servant-control... You become a bit blind to your own shortcomings and forget to think about the power you yourself possess” [I#3]. Another participant admitted that the role is perhaps not as neutral as is sometimes claimed. She intimated that only artists who independently apply for projects should receive commissions according to the rules of her municipality, “but if I find an interesting artist or oeuvre, I tip them off, ‘look here, we have a call out, send in an application if you are interested’” [I#5]. Another participant questioned the wisdom of delegating much decision-making power to art bureaucrats themselves: “Because often... if there is hand-picking it can become a lot of an issue of taste and preference – almost a specific style. You can almost see who is working [as an art bureaucrat] in a specific municipality” [I#10].

Execution

Quo vadis public art?

How do all the above-described twists and turns of public administration practice in Swedish municipalities in the end affect the art that is commissioned and produced? At least [I#3], who works as an art superintendent in a mid-sized Swedish municipality, was very explicit in her judgement that the preconditions generated by the municipal administrative context certainly affects the artistic outcome: “the inbuilt problem is that artists adjust themselves and that can be somewhat invisible. We don’t know to what exact extent they do this [...] it’s difficult. One can easily become blind to one’s own weaknesses as a civil servant. We choose our words carefully for things to become as good as possible. This can lead to compromises, a certain degree of steering” [I#3]. Another participant, [I#5], pointed out that the demand for artists to be able to navigate the municipal administrative context leads to the emergence of a limited pool of artists who possess the necessary skills to be considered fully “professional” in this context: “it is almost ironic sometimes when I see that our neighbouring municipalities contract the same artist, an artist who has been able to crack the code: ‘what is it they want?’. And that can become limited, while one at the same time can say that this artist is professional and can guide its project to completion. And I don’t know how to get around that” [I#5].

At another instance two participants reflected on the participation of artists in dialogue activities in the design process. One of the participants [I#2] lauded that the artists they work with are very “professional” and invest a great deal of effort in ensuring that their works are received well by the local community. To this [I#4] responded that being “accommodating and professional” is important for commissioned artists, but also added a worry: “do they compromise their artistic integrity to meet up halfway? And I don’t always have a good answer to that. [...] Can I make the call that this is so accommodating that we are beginning to water down... do you get what I mean?” [I#4]. To which [I#2] responded that she completely understands the worry because “if they [the artists] settle for a certain level [of accommodativeness] they get more commissions, it’s also about making a living” [I#2].

The afterlife of art: maintenance and disassembly

Finally, what happens once the public artwork has been commissioned, produced and installed? How do municipal administrative routines handle the “afterlife” of public art? From the discussions it became evident that this is a very important question for municipal administrators of public art, which relates to both mundane questions regarding maintenance budgets and more

philosophical issues relating to the life-length of an artwork: when is an artwork forfeited or ruined? These issues are also intertwined with complicated questions regarding national accounting standards and legal stipulations relating to intellectual property rights. Major repairs of damaged or defunct artworks must be approved by the holder of the copyright, which is usually the original artist – and disagreements regarding this can lead to entire artworks having to be removed instead. A problem with the decommissioning of public artworks is that they generally have a booked, non-depreciable value in the municipal accounts, and if the artwork is destroyed this materializes as a capital loss in the accounts. This leads to a challenge, as expressed by [I#11]: “If it’s decommissioned, this cost materializes. Since we don’t depreciate art. So that’s minus a million on the operating budget that year. [...] so we never want to decommission anything!” [[I#11]].

The whole discussion about the maintenance of artworks appears to be deeply enmeshed in a discussion of complex budgetary rules for Swedish municipalities, particularly those relating to the differentiation between investment budgets and operational budgets, and the permitted use of these different sets of funds. Most of the public art funds are taken from investment budgets. However, these are only allowed to be used for purchasing durable goods. This creates problems when municipalities wish to commission more contemporary artistic expressions such as temporary or event-based art. [I#6] narrates that she has been having deep-probing discussions with accountants in both her own and other municipal organizations to try to figure out how to deal with the question: “how long must ‘temporary’ last for us to be able to use the investment funds for something?”.

On the same note, [I#12] recounts the conundrums surrounding an artwork that was in the form of an illustration on the pavement of a local bicycle path. It was known from the outset that the piece would be worn out with time, a problem that was compounded by the fact that the municipal maintenance personnel failed to brush the snow off the bike lane, as agreed, and instead ploughed it – which deteriorated the artwork even more quickly than expected. This led to questions: “we’ve discussed this quite a bit, can we have something temporary like this? [...] Can we have a piece for a limited number of years? We are moving towards increasingly different materials and artistic expressions, so maybe we have to consider that everything won’t last a hundred years”.

Concluding Discussion

On the basis of transcripts from a full-day workshop with public art professionals this article has presented a practice-focused grounded theory-inspired account of situated everyday public administration practices for producing and managing public art in Swedish municipalities. The design of the workshop itself was informed by research within studies of practical knowledge and had the purpose of generating a space for articulating public art professionals’ situated experiences so that knowledge can be advanced regarding the “questions that practitioners deem central to their work” (Elías, 2022:70).

The analysed research materials were qualitatively rich but came from a very limited sample of currently active public art professionals in Sweden and was hence not representative in any formal statistical sense. Achieving formal statistical representativeness was however not an aim of this research, which rather can be characterized as a qualitative-explorative attempt to provide some initial steps in a broader collective-abductive process towards an empirically grounded understanding of the public administration of public art in Sweden “in the context of discovery” (Swedberg, 2012). Considering this, it would be premature to ask how the research presented in this paper could inform the development of current administrative practice. The relevant question at this point is perhaps rather how careful attention to situated practice might increase academic understandings of the preconditions and experiences of public art professionals by providing insights regarding what the practitioners themselves find to be key issues and concerns within the context of their practice.

In accordance with the methodological principles of GT, the analysis was conducted through an open coding process in which the thematic codes were allowed to emerge from the data itself, rather than imposing theory-derived pre-defined coding categories upon the data. However, when reviews of relevant previous literature within public administration research and cultural

policy studies were performed subsequent to the empirical analysis, it was clear that many of the key issues identified within these literatures also stood out in the analysis of the empirical material.

As evinced by the literature review the previous literature on the public administration of public art has primarily focused on three main areas of concern: producing normative arguments for public art investment, investigating the management of controversies around public art, and studying how administrative practice impacts artistic practices in the production of public art. The empirical analysis shows that these are all issues that the public art professionals confront in their everyday working life. Practitioners do have to engage in debates about the utility and value of public art, particularly when juxtaposed against other urgent municipal welfare needs. The participants reflected in nuanced ways regarding the risks and potentials of arguing for the value of “art for art’s sake” in contrast to claims that art can contribute to all sorts of other public goods. Regarding controversies, the practitioners discussed not only the value of professionalism and acting as a “shield for the art” but also recounted frictions relating to both local elected politicians, engaged local publics and municipal colleagues. Much of the workshop discussions also focused on the mundane but nonetheless impactful aspects of their work, including the impact of organizational models, budgetary rules and accounting practices.

Some of the central debates in cultural policy studies in the Nordic context have in recent years focused on the evolution of the previously identified “Nordic cultural policy model”. There has been an identified shift beginning in the 1970’s from a democratization of culture paradigm towards a cultural democracy paradigm, and then from the 1990’s and onwards a tendency towards an increasingly overt instrumentalization of culture in the service of urban renewal, regional development, economic growth, etc. Johannisson (2006) in turn referred to these tendencies as three identifiable competing discourses in contemporary Swedish cultural policy: “the quality discourse”, “welfare discourse”, and “alliance discourse”. A central topic of scholarly analysis in CPS has also been the evolution of the arm’s length principle for public cultural funding allocation, and a tendency towards an explicit politicization of the realm of cultural production which has carried with it an increased questioning of artistic autonomy and freedom of expression.

The analysis of the workshop materials shows that the democratization of culture/“quality discourse” is often invoked by many of the workshop participants, who often refer to their mission as that of making high-quality art available to the local general public. However, there is also a strong presence in the material of the cultural democracy/“welfare discourse”, with expressions of support for public engagement in artistic production and in decisions about the design of local living environments. Participatory art methods are repeatedly mentioned, including e.g. murals and various types of interactive artworks. But there are also many concerns expressed regarding an emerging increasingly narrowly instrumental understanding of the value of art from the sides of both funding agencies and local politicians. Further, the workshop participants tell off an erosion of respect for the arm’s length distancing of politics from decision-making regarding allocation of public art funding on the municipal level, and a sense of local politicians becoming increasingly “meddlesome” in detailed decisions regarding the funding and production of public art. This can be interpreted as a sign of the increasing politicization of public art and a weakening respect for the safeguarding of artistic integrity from some local politicians and parts of the general public.

However, perhaps the most important finding of the analysis was not that it confirmed the relevance of central themes of previous scholarly work on the public administration of public art specifically, and on cultural policy work in the Nordic countries more broadly. Rather, what stood out in the analysis was how, within ongoing situated practice, the ‘big’ issues of principle identified in the research literature (e.g., the substantial meaning of cultural democracy, artistic integrity, value of expertise, etc.) seldom seem to instantiate themselves in practice in a pure form, but rather almost always appear to emerge on the scene entangled in each other and in mundane administrative concerns relating to e.g. public procurement laws, accounting rules and budgeting routines. It thus comes across as important to stress this key characteristic of situated practice: that ethical and political conflict lines constantly intersect with practical and

mundane administrative and economic challenges to generate dilemmas that simultaneously involve numerous difficult parameters of different character.

On the basis of the above, one central conclusion of the article is that it is important and valuable to have research which analytically distills and clearly articulates the decisive issues of principle regarding public art practice specifically and cultural policy work more broadly, so that it becomes possible to clearly identify what are the societal stakes that are in play within the entangled mess of ongoing situated practice. Still, it is also important to keep in mind that when these issues present themselves within the workflow of ongoing practice it is almost always in an intractably impure form, which makes it difficult for practitioners to address them in any definite or strongly principled manner. Rather, the navigation of the flow of practice appears to demand a highly developed competence for situated ethical and political judgement, and a deep knowledge of the context of practice, as well as strong subject expertise.

The rich but rather limited material on which this article has been based provides insights into how the public administration of public art is practiced within the specific context of contemporary Swedish municipalities. However, considering the wide-spread existence of municipal and other state-managed public art programmes around the world and the limited public administration literature that so far exists on this subject, there is a dire need for more studies that can increase our understanding of the public administration of public art in also in many other political and cultural contexts.

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Notes

¹ Translated from Swedish by the authors.

² In 2025 the Swedish government presented a proposal for a major reform of national art institutions. In accordance with the reform, as of the 1st of January 2026 Public Art Agency Sweden is together with the Swedish Centre for Architecture and Design (Arkdes) integrated into the be integrated into Moderna Museet, the national museum for modern art. The proposal is controversial, and there are many within the sector who fear that the unique heritage and competence of almost a century of public art support represented by the Public Art Agency risks becoming lost in the process.

³ <https://publicartagencySweden.com/working-with-art-in-public-environments/work-processes-for-public-art/> [Retrieved on the 28th of August 2025]

⁴ Following Throsby (2010) we here also include work within cultural economics under the broader umbrella of cultural policy studies.

⁵ The most important of these simplifications of the methodology was the compression of the seminar to a single day format, as well as the abstention from demanding extensive preparations from the seminar participants. For a description of the more elaborate version of the seminar methodology see e.g. Göransson & Hammarén, 2006; Fock, 2006.

⁶ The discussion questions provided were (translated from Swedish):

“What can an artist do?”: *What types of artistic work can be procured by the municipality? How are choices made regarding place, artistic expression and format? How do e.g. guidelines, budgets, and political influence affect decisions, in relation to the wishes of potential partners’ wishes and interests? What role is awarded to the citizens in these decisions? When can controversies arise, and what are the reasons for this?*

“How does public art come about?”: *Where in the organization are decisions about public art made? Which bodies are involved in the preparation of the decisions, which factors or agencies are decisive, and how is this work coordinated? What is the process for preparing an art purchase, or the procurement of artistic work? Are there available resources for maintenance and art pedagogical work? When can controversies arise, and what are the reasons for this?*

“Why is public art important?”: *In which ways can we understand the democratic function of public art? How does art contribute to a sustainable societal development? What is the meaning of ‘aesthetic value’*

and artistic quality – how can it be ascertained, experienced, and discussed? What is the function of art in relation to political goals concerning equality, participation, accessibility, safety, etc? When can controversies arise, and what are the reasons for this?

⁷ One group experienced technical difficulties in the second session, and this groups' discussion in this session was instead documented through notetaking.

⁸ The initial 13 code memos were labeled (translated from Swedish): "1% of what?"; "Too little money or too much"; "The value of art: what makes art valuable?"; "Which competences are involved in preparing decisions?"; "Big and small, rich and poor"; "The impact of procurement/procured competence/procurement legislation"; "The role of aesthetic expertise & the power of the public administrator"; "Political involvement & arm's length distance in practice – what is a 'lagom' long arm?"; "Influence of the public"; "Artistic freedom: how steered is artistic expression?"; "Who considers and is responsible for maintenance?"; "Investment- and operational budgets"; "What is the lifetime of an artwork? (a technical question!)".

⁹ As presented in the Results section: "Different realities"; "Great expectations"; "Conflicting competences"; "Navigating regulations"; "How long should an arm be?"; "The engaged public and the power of the bureaucrat"; "Quo vadis public art?"; "The afterlife of art: maintenance and disassembly".

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