

Punchy 5x5 Public Art Project Electrifies Washington DC

Benjamin Sutton, Thursday, October 9, 2014



Abigail DeVille, *The New Migration* (2014).
Photo: Joshua Cogan.

For most people, thinking of public art in Washington, DC conjures images of presidential monuments and Smithsonian sculpture gardens. But, far from the National Mall, the US capital is making new contemporary public art a priority. Last month the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities launched the second edition of the 5x5 Project, a public art initiative shifting the focus onto the city's patchwork of distinct neighborhoods and providing a platform for outdoor artworks of a more unmonumental stripe.

The initiative is led by five curators, each of whom presented five works following a theme of their choosing, with predictably varied and uneven results.

[...]

Another 5x5 Project piece about migrant workers was deemed insensitive for the way it engaged with the surrounding community: **Abigail DeVille's** *The New Migration*. Conceived as a two-part work in DC's Anacostia neighborhood, it began with a public procession and performance on the evening of September 6, and was accompanied by one of **DeVille's** trademark post-apocalyptic installations in two adjacent vacant storefronts. While the former was well attended, despite a rainstorm, the latter drew complaints for replicating the destitute conditions that, not so long ago, defined the redeveloping neighborhood (see «Community Outrage Forces Public Art Project's Dismantling in DC»). Finally removed after the local fire department deemed it to be a fire hazard, **DeVille's** installation was apparently too successful in its evocation of poverty, urban renewal, and gentrification. I'd argue that any public art piece that sparks awareness, interest, and can galvanize the local community is already more successful than a giant marble statue of a dead powerful man.