

# “I Finally Got One!”

## Doug Kornfeld: Winning a Public Art Commission

by Jane Ingram Allen

**D**oug Kornfeld's sculptures and installations examine our use of signs and symbols. Doug lives in the Boston area and has been exhibiting his work widely since the early '80s. He does public art installations as well as gallery and museum pieces and computer-based work.

I met Doug in 1998 when we were both selected as artists for the annual outdoor sculpture exhibition at Connemara Conservancy in Dallas, TX. Doug was one of the 10 artists for that year invited to create a site-specific piece. I was impressed with Doug's work and his professionalism, and we have stayed in touch mainly by e-mail since then.

A few weeks ago, I received an enthusiastic e-mail from Doug with the subject “I finally got one!” announcing that he had won a public art commission. Doug has been commissioned to make a 7'x50' mural for the Civic Center Bus Station in Denver, Colorado.

Doug's winning design will be composed of more than 3,400 handmade ceramic tiles, each with an individual image. The mural will depict two arms reaching out as if to shake hands.

The tiles that make up the arms will depict a myriad of figures with different body types symbolizing the diversity of the Denver transit riders.

The concept of the piece is the moment of transformation from an anonymous traveler to a unique individual when shaking hands at the beginning or end of a journey.

In this interview, Doug offers some insights into how he landed his first major public art commission.

**Jane Ingram Allen:** I assume this was a public art competition. Where did you hear about this opportunity?

**Doug Kornfeld:** I am on lots of

mail and e-mail lists. I think this one came in the mail several months ago, and I decided to enter. *[EDITOR'S NOTE: This competition was listed in Art Calendar; its deadline was July 15.]*

**Jane:** I know about your piece at Connemara Conservancy in 1998, but I am wondering how you got started in public art. What other experience have you had in this field?

**Doug:** My first public art experience was when I submitted a proposal for a temporary piece with a budget of \$200 for a small competition in Acton, MA, in 1996. I have enjoyed the experience of creating site specific pieces for temporary exhibition. The challenge has been to maintain my art concepts and at the same time keep to very strict budgets.

**Jane:** How many public art competitions have you entered over the years?

**Doug:** I have applied for literally hundreds of competitions. I have been awarded money to do temporary pieces a number of times. I have been a finalist for permanent commissions five times, but this is the first permanent commission I have been awarded.

**Jane:** What do you think made this proposal successful as opposed to the others you have done?

**Doug:** The concept was simple and the design was very striking. It was an easy piece to understand and appreciate.

**Jane:** What did you have to send initially and how did you prepare your materials for entering this? Did you know the site, have contacts there, or visit it beforehand?

**Doug:** I initially submitted 10 slides and a resume. I have hundreds of slides of my work that are labeled and ready to submit when competitions arise. I submitted slides of my installations in museums and my temporary public installations. All I knew was that the site

was a wall in a Denver bus station and that the budget was \$40,000. I did not visit the site until I was made a finalist.

**Jane:** Wow, I'm really impressed that you have all those slides available and ready to send out to many competitions. I think this shows real commitment and dedication. You do have to enter lots of these to finally get one. I'm curious about how the idea for this piece developed. How is it related to your other work?

**Doug:** My concepts for the piece are ideas I have been working on for almost 15 years. The shape of the wall, and the fact that the site was related to travel, sparked my interest and inspired the design. I am very pleased that I did not have to compromise on my artistic idea, yet still was able to develop a piece that the jury could relate to.

At one time I had talked to another public artist who suggested some changes in an idea I was submitting. Perhaps it would have gotten me the job, but in the end, if I'd made those changes, it wouldn't have said what I wanted it to say. I had to ask myself: “What's the point? I'm sure not making lots of money doing these things.”

My dream is to do a work of art that does not compromise my ideas and vision but that can still be related to by a general audience. This is quite a challenge.

**Jane:** What do you think is the most difficult part of the public art process and getting a commission?

**Doug:** The most difficult part is putting your heart and soul and many hours into finalist proposals and then not getting the commission. I put hundreds of hours into three different finalist proposals and came in second place three times in a row.

**Jane:** Tell me about the process for a competition like this. What did you submit initially, and what did you submit after being selected as a finalist? Did you

have to make a maquette or just a sketch? Did you go for a personal interview? And were you paid for this?

**Doug:** The process is generally submitting 10-15 slides. If you make finalist, you are awarded anywhere between \$500 and \$1,500 to create a complete proposal. They also give you a plane ticket to come present your proposal. You are then given 30 minutes to explain your piece and take questions from the jury. I usually have a maquette or illustrations of the artwork that I present at the interview.

**Jane:** What did you bring to present at this interview in Denver?

**Doug:** I created several images using the computer to show exactly what the piece would look like in the space — digital mock-ups of the piece [including the one below]. I also brought tile samples and copies of my cost estimate.

**Jane:** Did you need references for this competition?

**Doug:** I did not have to submit references for this competition. I have in the past, though. I have submitted museum curators' names as well as public art administrators I've completed work for as references.

**Jane:** What was the interview process like, and how did you relate to the panel? What do you think influenced them most?

**Doug:** The interview process is very challenging, knowing that what you say and how you present yourself may get you the commission or lose it. I think this proposal worked because the idea was very clear, the image striking, and the jury seemed to relate to my ideas.

**Jane:** How will you handle the logistics of making the piece and installing it in Denver?

**Doug:** I will be fabricating part of the piece myself, contracting out another part, and then supervising the installation. The piece is modular, so I can do lots of the work myself. I will fabricate the piece in Boston and then

drive the components out to Denver and stay there while it is installed. The installation should take less than 10 days. The fabrication should take 4-5 months.

I will, of course, be maintaining my part-time teaching jobs so I will expect to put in a lot of 60-hour weeks. Fortunately, this design work is pretty much completed and was finished during the summer when my teaching schedule was lighter.

**Jane:** Do you have a contract? How was that negotiated?

**Doug:** I am presently going over the contract with a lawyer friend. One interesting part of the contract is — and I am sure this is because of the Richard Serra controversy in NYC — the city reserves the right to move, sell, and even destroy the artwork if they choose. They do give me the option of removing the piece if they choose to destroy it. I am not happy about that clause in the contract, but it's either accept it or don't do the job.

When I sign the contract, I will be given a check for \$10,000. Then I will receive two more interim checks and then the final check for \$10,000 after the piece is completed. This is a little bit scary, because in my budget my artist fee is much less than \$10,000, so I will have paid money out of my own pocket to finish the installation. If my final check is delayed, I will be in trouble.

**Jane:** Yes, it has been my experience too that it is most difficult to anticipate all the costs and details involved, and many times you end up making very little money. How did you develop your budget for materials, fabrication, and so on? Did you get definite estimates on everything including installation?

**Doug:** The budgeting of the piece was almost as difficult and time-consuming as the actual design. I have lots of friends in the architecture and design world who were kind enough to help me with costing out my work. I have also been lucky enough to have a friend who is a structural engineer who has helped me engineer some of

my proposals and come up with realistic budgets.

I made lots of phone calls and did huge amounts of research to make sure that what I was proposing was doable within the budget constraints. What I feared most was proposing something that I would have to back away from — or worse, get halfway through and find that I would run out of money.

Because of this fear, I have been extremely careful. Every piece I have worked on has come in on time and on budget. This has helped me, because all of the people I have worked for have really enjoyed working with me and were happy to later write recommendations.

**Jane:** What suggestions would you give to artists who want to break in to the public art field?

**Doug:** Suggestions? Have a very thick skin. It is heartbreaking to work so hard on a proposal, develop a budget for it, write and practice a presentation, and then come in second.

**Jane:** Anything else you can think of that would be of interest to other artists contemplating doing this sort of thing?

**Doug:** Make lots of friends. I could never have done any of my proposals alone. I have great friends who are incredibly generous with their time who have aided me immeasurably.

Also, keep your word. And don't be a *prima donna*. I have curator friends who swear they will never work with certain artists again nor give them recommendations because they were a pain to work with or just couldn't get their act together and because of it made other people's lives crazy.

*Jane Ingram Allen is an artist and writer living in New York. For more information about Jane's work visit [www.janeingramallen.com](http://www.janeingramallen.com). For more information about Doug Kornfeld and to follow his progress on this and other projects, visit [www.awaka-inc.com](http://www.awaka-inc.com)*