# 4th Space podcast: Sandra Margolian in Conversation with Annie Gérin

A recent podcast hosted by 4th Space delves into the multiple aspects of a university public art collection and outlines the context and objectives that will frame Concordia’s public art policy project.

## Transcript

### Introductory excerpt from 4th Space podcast

**Sandra Margolian**: People want to invest in things that are tangible or that will be there and permanent; people can interact with forever and this idea of investing in things that are intangible, that will go away, other than maybe through documentation, I think is a new way of thinking about investing in culture.

**[Podcast theme music playing]**

## Introduction

**Douglas Moffat (4th Space podcast host)**: Hello and welcome to the Fourth Space Podcast. Today's episode we sit down with Sandra Margolian and Annie Gérin for a conversation about public art at Concordia and creating a public art collection.

**Douglas**: Sandra Margolian is the university's first public art lead. Concordia's collection of public art is one of the most eclectic collections of public art of any university in Canada.

Margolian is working to ensure the ongoing long-term care of that collection on both campuses and also to help develop that collection with community in mind.

She's sitting down with Annie Gérin, the new dean of the Faculty of Fine Arts, but also art historian well known for her research in public art, specifically Canadian and Soviet art and how art is experienced outside of traditional gallery spaces.

Thank you for listening.

And we would like to begin by acknowledging that 4th Space and Concordia University are located on unceded Indigenous lands.

The Kanien’kehá:ka Nation is recognized as the custodians of the lands and waters on which we gather today. And Tiohtià:ke/Montréal is historically known as a gathering place for many First Nations.

We respect the continued connections with the past, the present and the future in our ongoing relationships with Indigenous and other peoples within the Montreal community.

## Conversation between Sandra Margolian and Annie Gérin

**Annie Gérin**: Hi Sandra. You're Concordia's new public art lead. How did you get interested in public art?

**Sandra Margolian**: Well, actually, it started at university when I was doing my Bachelor's in Fine Arts at Mount Allison University. One of my professors, Rita McKeough, gave us a site-specific assignment.

I found it much more engaging to respond and reflect on something tangible. I love that place could become intrinsically linked in part of the work.

**Annie**: I've been interested in public art for a long time. I'm an art historian. I wrote an MA thesis on ephemeral public art during festivals in Soviet Russia, and then I went on to do a PhD thesis on monumental art in the Moscow subway.

After that, I shifted a little bit from Soviet art to Canadian public art, but the initial interest that I had stuck around for a while.

So, my research shifted a bit to issues of placemaking and wayfinding with public art and then gentrification. So, how can public art make a space more reassuring for different constituencies.

But also, how sometimes it's used by cities, for example, to displace certain populations. So there's a very political aspect of public art that I was interested in; who's visible in public spaces and who's invisible.

So questions of gender and race and sexuality, and who has the right to show their presence and to tell their stories in public art. So that's been a big part of my research, too.

And then most recently, I've been interested in writing about the monuments that have been removed from public spaces like the James McGill statues, for example. In that specific context, the role that ephemeral public art can play in disrupting narratives in public art.

I really love public art because it allows artists to reach publics who would never go into a gallery, normally, who would not necessarily have access.

**Sandra**: Yeah, like the, you know, you're just walking along and suddenly you discover something that's not necessarily supposed to be there, or that you know that, you wouldn’t think that would be there, and interrupts your daily life.

## Description of Concordia’s public art collection

**Annie**: Before we go deeper into our discussion, would you describe to me what Concordia's public art collection looks like?

**Sandra**: Well, right now, a mixed bag of permanent, mostly large-scale artworks, that span — at least the dates that we know of — the 30s to present day. The newest sculpture at Loyola is several storeys tall.

There's an entire façade of a building in glass. There's stained glass panels that came from the Jesuits’ residence. There's a piece from Expo 67.

**Annie**: So there's really a wide array of mediums and of formats. How can we visit It? Or how can we access it?

**Sandra**: Located mostly in public spaces that people can access. And you don't have to necessarily go to Concordia. So, it's on the buildings, it's outside the buildings, it's in the metro tunnels. It's mostly made up of commissions, donations and the One Percent program.

**Annie**: My favorite piece or actually my two favourite pieces in the collection are [Nicolas Baier](https://www.concordia.ca/arts/public-art/about/nicolas-baier.html)'s work on the EV Building. So, the very large curtain wall. It's huge and it's delicate and it's absolutely wonderful. And also the new [Di-Octo sculpture](https://www.concordia.ca/arts/public-art/about/anthony-howe.html), the kinetic sculpture that is next to the Hall Building.

For you, what would be the highlights of the collection?

**Sandra**: It's funny that you mention those two. I also, I mean, the Di-Octo one is the most popular piece. it's become a landmark, I think. Well, as well as the Baier, because the Baier can be seen from all of downtown.

I've heard people that work in buildings like way, you know, in the Place Ville Marie and they see it. [It’s] very sad that it might soon get covered by a building that's being built in front of it.

The Di-Octo — I love that it uses wind power to move and that it's so delicate. In fact, I was very worried about it surviving a Montreal winter, but it has. So that comes from my conservator responsibilities for the collection.

And the other one that I found is really interesting is [Adad Hannah’s “Leap”](https://www.concordia.ca/arts/public-art/about/adad-hannah.html) out at Loyola. It's really well integrated into the building. It's the whole front façade. The way that Adad Hannah approached that piece was interesting, where he sort of made a call to people that work at Loyola to involve them in the actual piece.

People that are leaping across the front of the building are actually people that worked at Loyola.

## Multiple aspects of a university public art collection

**Annie**: I think that's a really interesting point that you're making right now about how often public art is used to make visible processes or practices that are behind the walls of the building. So this is a really really good case of it.

In the context of the university, what do you think the role is of having a public art collection — beyond what you've just described, beyond showing what's happening in certain buildings.

**Sandra**: I think, as of any sort of public collection, it can activate the public space aesthetically or culturally; it can speak to the history and values of past and present; it can contribute to the identity of the community.

Specifically, a university collection can go a bit farther and serve as a pedagogical resource. It can critique also, the space that it inhabits. And I think that, you know as a university, I think we're primed to do that. It can be a starting point to engage in conversation.

## Strengths in public art at Concordia

**Annie**: It's interesting because we actually have a lot of strengths in public art at Concordia. We have artists who are really well known for their work in that field. I'm thinking of Nadia Myre, for example, who's a very well-known Indigenous artist but also a professor in Studio Arts.

She recently created a really really wonderful piece for the city of Montreal titled, *While Waiting (2019)*, which is based on the Great Peace [treaty] of Montreal.

But we also had several students who have this expertise. Nico Williams, for example, who was recently awarded the Bronfman fellowship, just finished his first public sculpture for the Sick Kids Hospital in Toronto. He's also an Indigenous artist.

Quentin VerCetty, who has won a City of Toronto public art commission to commemorate Joshua Glover, who was a former slave and abolitionist. So we have that expertise that we can actually draw on as an institution.

**Sandra**: It would be Interesting for professors to find a way to use the collection for their coursework, or for students to respond or critique the work that exists through the creation of ephemeral art in addition to also creating new permanent works.

That's important — that the new work is not just ephemeral.

**Annie**: I like your vision of having both permanent and ephemeral in different, different jars.

You might know that Concordia is going to be participating in projects with the REM (Réseau express métropolitain). So it's a one percent for the REM, and students from all four universities are going to be asked to create works that respond to the project.

And one of the discussions that we've been having at the faculty is what that could [look] like. Should it be, you know, more traditional sculptural works. And the response has been really interesting.

Sound artists are interested, musicians are interested. But then people really on the performing arts side were interested in collaborating as well. So, from the point of view of dance, from the point of view of theater. And I think that more and more there's this expanded understanding of what public art can be.

So we're moving away from the traditional monument — that was sculptural, that were permanent — to forms that have this direct bodily impact in public spaces.

**Sandra**: People want to invest in things that are tangible or that will be there in permanence; people can interact with forever. And this idea of investing in things that are intangible — that will go away other than maybe through documentation — I think, is a new way of thinking about investing in culture.

**Annie**: The Quebec government has done it already with the one percent, so there are interesting models with that and it's actually really has opened up new ways for artists.

Because one of the goals of public art — I mean there's many many roles that public art can play, right — in terms of creating some social mapping or anchoring social identities and all of that. But one of the roles that the public art can play is to support creativity in contemporary artists — emerging or established artists.

Traditionally, public art commissions were given to sculptors and once in a while some are ceramicists and painters. But now, we're able to actually think of public art very very differently through installation, performance, projections, etc.

But now, Concordia is thinking about creating a public art policy. Why now? And what are you hoping that this will achieve.

## Concordia’s public art policy project

**Sandra**: Actually it's a policy and also terms of reference for an advisory committee, which I think is important. And it's changing how art coming into the university is managed.

The past several years has been a huge global cultural shift, and the same thing is happening within Concordia that's allowing the project to happen now.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's call to Action, the Black Lives Matter movement are encouraging this re-evaluation of museum policies and practices. This has mobilized the arts community and institutions to sort of question how they can ensure equitable, inclusive practices when they're developing their collections; how they present these collections; how they're governed with structures of the boards and policies.

I'm hoping that through the process of doing consultations with specialists, informants and also community consultations, we’ll come to an agreement on what is actually important or necessary.

But some of the things that I think that this policy should address are: well I'm hoping it's going to give a framework to govern the development and the conservation of the collection that we currently have; that it'll provide a clear mission and vision and set the groundwork for permanent funding for conservation, programming, promotions, collections management and new curatorial opportunities.

A policy should provide direction for making appraisals and acquisitions decisions, allocating resources and accountability.

I think that, personally I hope that the acquisitions of more permanent artworks by women, Indigenous artists, Black artists and other artists of color as well as emerging artists is very important because there is a definite lack in our collection right now.

You know, as a university, when we decide to take on new projects or new things, these discussions definitely happen. But it's not just one person deciding what comes in or goes out of the university.

**Annie**: Thank you, thank you, Sandra. I'm also thrilled that the collection will become more visible and will likely expand with this new policy. So thank you very much for taking that on, and we'll be very very happy in the Faculty of Fine Arts to collaborate with you. Thank you.

**Sandra**: I'm looking forward to a follow-up discussion very soon. Amazing. Thank you.

**[Podcast theme music playing]**

**Douglas Moffat (4th Space podcast host):** Thank you for listening to the 4th Space podcast. You can follow us on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter — @cu4th space — and wherever else you find your podcasts.

The podcast is hosted by me, Douglas Moffatt and produced by Anna Waclawek. Editing by Chloe Lalonde and Makai Hochro; social media and web support by Kari Valmestad. Our theme music is courtesy of Super Continent. Thanks for listening.