



"The Corporate Ladder" was soundly rejected by the tenants of the Lakeview II office building.

PUBLIC ART

Who says it's art, who says it's good, and who gets to decide whether it belongs here?

BY STEVE KELLY

IF, AS CALVIN COOLIDGE SAID, THE business of America is business, what room, if any, is left for art? How about art that publicly satirizes America's bottom-line obsession with making it to the top?

Last January a satirical sculpture called "The Corporate Ladder" was removed from the lobby of Columbia's Lakeview II office building in the wake of bitter criticism that it was "racist," "sexist" and "a slap in the face" to business people.

Tenants in the building (though there were some that supported the sculpture) didn't simply dislike "The Corporate Ladder." They hated it. A few even threatened to move out of the building — to pick up and leave. That threat — "either it goes or we go" — is a demonstration of how deep — and personal — the controversy over public art can become.

For some, an offending piece of art can present a *physical* as well as an aesthetic assault

— an assault not only of the senses but of the landscape, the very turf into which people have sunk roots.

There are a lot of ways to reflect on the fate of "The Corporate Ladder," including a reprisal of the same issues that occupy today's national arts agenda; what place does art have in the public arena? And should that art spark controversy or should it be benign and seek to appeal to the widest possible audience?

In this particular instance, the scuffle over the public's response to a piece of public art raised some questions germane to Columbia itself. Is the city — founded and built by a corporation — ready for public art that challenges some of its cherished notions about itself, its ongoing need for self-promotion and celebration? Or will it always be home to people trees, water curtains and statues of bears suckling cubs and people embracing — nice works, but hardly those which challenge the

city's corporate culture.

If, as its creator claims, "The Corporate Ladder" held a mirror up to us, are we guilty of finching? Or, was the image so distorted as to become meaningless, in which case we were perfectly right in booting it out the door on its misanthropic behind, simply on the grounds of irrelevance?

IRONICALLY, IT WAS A BUSINESS WHICH brought "The Corporate Ladder" to Columbia in the first place: Principal Financial Group, an insurance and investment business based in Des Moines, Iowa which owns the Lakeview II building.

Principal commissioned "The Corporate Ladder" from a young New York City artist named Ed Massey, who had done a similar, smaller version of the ladder which, Massey said, had appeared in a California art gallery to rave reviews, including those from the gallery's corporate sponsors.