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**KAILA:** WELCOME TO VALLEY 101, A PODCAST FROM *THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC* AND AZCENTRAL.COM WHERE *WE* ANSWER THE QUESTIONS *YOU* ASK ABOUT METRO PHOENIX. I'm your host, Kaila White.

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**KAILA:** In this episode we're answering a pretty specific question about a piece of public art that drew a surprising level of attention in the 90s. The artwork is called Wall Cycle to Ocotillo - yes, it's kind of a strange name.

It appeared along the State Route 51 in the 90s. It was controversial, mainly for the giant pots that sat on top of the walls on the sides of the freeway. If you've never seen or heard about them, don't worry - Maritza spins an entertaining tale of Phoenix history and the role of public art in our city that I think you'll like no matter what.

**Maritza VO:**

*[Mockumentary](#) [00:20] "On a small stretch of road running through town strange things began to take place. Pots began mysteriously appearing along this once peaceful thoroughfare" [00:32] [12.0]*

This student mockumentary pokes fun at the public art project known as Wall Cycle to Ocotillo.

But let's go back a bit because this all starts really with the development of Arizona State Route 51, the freeway that connects Interstate 10 just outside Downtown Phoenix with Loop 101 on the north side of Phoenix. It started being built in 1986. At the same time, the Phoenix City Council adopted the Percent for Art Ordinance

**Ed:** *[00:01:32] And what that means is that for the last thirty three years now, a penny out of every buck that the city spends on designing and building its infrastructure can be used to involve artists and other designers and thinkers in coming up with new ways to imagine public spaces. [00:01:53] [20.9]*

This is Edward Lebow the current director of the Phoenix's Public Art Program. While he was not a part of the program at its inception, he knows its history. By adopting this new ordinance, it created the need for the Public Arts program. People began thinking about using this new public art fund to beautify this big new freeway dividing the city.

The freeway split residential neighborhoods in half. Large concrete sound walls that are meant to reduce the sound of traffic, went up at the edge of the neighborhood. The construction of the freeway was met with mixed reviews from Phoenix citizens. By 1988, the first part of the freeway opened.

**Ed:** [00:18:34] In 1988, Phoenix voters through the bond election of 1988 approved 18 million dollars [00:18:46][12.3]

Part of that \$18 million was allocated to mitigate the impact the freeway had on the neighborhoods it cut through. The city began to search for a way to do that.

**Ed:** [00:20:04] and the planning department came to the then young public art program and said, look, we have this opportunity. Do you think artists could be involved in this kind of work?  
[00:20:16][12.3]

So they put out a national call for public art artists. After a lengthy application process, the city picked Lajos Heder and Mags Harries.

**Mags:** [00:02:31] I'm Mags Harris and I'm a sculptor. Then I teach at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts. And we've been working together for this was actually at this project working together, but being in fact, involved in public art for many, many years,. [00:02:54][22.5]

**Lajos:** [00:02:55] Working together for 30 years. So. [00:02:57][2.2]  
[24.8]

You might be able to tell from their accents they aren't American. Mags is from Wales a country part of Great Britain. Lajos was born in Hungary. The married couple live in Cambridge, Massachusetts, so I spoke with them over Skype. I asked the couple what about the project drew them to Phoenix.

[\(Cue Music\)](#) or [this](#)

**Lajos:** [00:10:21] I was also fascinated by the fact that this was a very new city. It was kind of like a teenager. Haven't quite gotten used to being a city yet. So try to figure out what that means.  
[00:10:35][13.7]

This is Lajos one half of the Harries and Heder team. They were in their 40s at the time and were excited to start designing their project. To them public art should reflect the community. Since they weren't Arizona natives they hoped to get local resident's input.

**Mags:** *[00:19:23] There were six thousand invitations sent out to meet us and to really engage with us. And we sat in this room for two days. Fifteen people came in all [00:19:42][18.4]*

They held a public forum with the Public Arts program to receive feedback from the public. Mags told me that the people who came weren't really interested in their project. They had other concerns they wanted to address. So they knew sitting in a room waiting for people wasn't working. They needed to find another way to hear the community's opinions.

**Mags:** *[00:19:50] so we had to go and engage with people in the community. And even though that was a nicer way anyway, because we've been invited into people's houses and the reason we had bikes is because we were invited into a wonderful adobe house that that they offered us a bike. So we had known some bikes to really understand the whole thing. So. [00:20:16][26.3]*

Mags and Lajos needed to find an idea for their artwork. So they went out on their borrowed bikes to canvass the five mile stretch on both the west and east neighborhoods split by the 51.

Traveling from Ocotillo Road down to McDowell Road they used this time to learn more about the area. They stopped to talk to local residents. After their observations in the area inspiration finally found its way to Mags.

**Lajos:** *[00:13:41] And then one morning Mags wakes up. I wake up and Mag says, Vessels. [00:13:47][6.8]*

Initially Lajos was confused by his wife's idea. Mags wanted to use the pots slash vessels as a way to bridge the different cultures and experiences of people in the neighborhood and in Phoenix. You know... Phoenix is a melting pot. Pun intended.

**(out cue music)**

**Mags:** *[00:13:04] So it was an opportunity to really look at vessels and to look to then play off those different cultures. [00:13:14][10.4]*

By using vessels, they could use multiple pieces tell people's stories and represent the area. I asked the duo to tell me their favorite moment while working on this project. They pointed to a moment when they came across a home with a unique characteristic.

**Lajos:** *[00:16:56] in the yard of this regular house, there was a wall of bird cage, probably 40 feet long. [00:17:05][9.3]*

And as they approached the house they met a woman who after more than 20 years Lajos still remembers her name. Mona Gilbert. She told them why she had a makeshift aviary in front of her house.

*(Cue sentimental music here)*

**Lajos:** [00:17:45] We found out that she had a daughter. Who, I guess were in the 20s. So whatever she age she was she died. Didn't get the details but. And she was obviously grieving very seriously. And this was all kind of a shrine to her daughter. [00:17:59][13.8]

This woman's story and her tribute to her daughter inspired Lajos and Mags to include a gazebo in their design to attract hummingbirds. They designed a red gazebo with intricate steelwork of hummingbirds and added bird feeders. They located it near her house on fairmount avenue east of the 51.

**Lajos:** [00:19:00] If you could get someone involved and actually participate by keeping the birds alive, it becomes important. She probably went out there every day and looked after birds. We didn't find too many connections like that. That was unusual, but it was very, very remarkable. [00:19:18][18.8]

*(Out cue music)*

In all, the project was in 20 different places and had 35 different pieces. The pieces were installed on both the east and west sides of the SR-51. There is a 15 foot high baby blue gazebo in the shape of a teapot. Inside there is a bench where you can sit. Mags describes to me a few more of the vessels they designed.

**Mags:** [00:15:40] Other ones are you know, probably only two foot high. And they become nesting areas for birds. And some of them had a water to with them, too. And they were all solar powered. [00:15:56][16.1]

Six of them were mounted on top of the sound wall and could be seen to the drivers on the highway.

They installed one pot that was mirrored so that it would catch the light of the cars headlights making them gitter. Another was split in half.

**Mags:** [00:30:22] you know, it was kind of. That was supposed to be a whimsical, wonderful kind of thing along that kind of a road that needed needed some whimsy in it. [00:30:38][15.8]

Once the project was all done, they named it Wall Cycle to Ocotillo. You might be thinking what an odd name. Remember they borrowed bicycles from a neighbor who came to their public meeting.

**Lajos:** [00:25:36] And so and they lived on Ocotillo. So it was kind of a wordplay for Ocotillo and bicycling, the walls. So put all that together and you get wall cycle to Ocotillo. [00:25:50][14.0]

**(Cue Music here)**

The installation of the pots took three months and finished in February 1992. Mags and Lajos were proud of their work. When the art project was finished, people started to take notice and they weren't happy.

The couple thought this public art enriched the neighborhoods it was in. And the public... hated it. People started making fun of it, like in that mockumentary

**Mokumentary:** [00:02:44] To be honest they frighten me. I was walking my dog Chips. And I felt this presence. This strange power. I rounded the corner and there's this large towering crock. [00:03:04] [20.0]

Some people thought the pots and the gazebos were straight up ugly. One prankster even put a gold toilet and a trash can on top of the 51's sound wall to parody the project.

The Arizona Republic's editorial board wrote opinion pieces ripping it. People also criticized it for being expensive.

You see in the early 1990s, the country was going through a recession.

By 1992, the city of Phoenix was making budget cuts and so was the state and county. However, the money for Wall Cycle only came from the City of Phoenix.

The Republic reported that public libraries had to furlough employees and cut down their hours.  
**(outcue music here)**

But Edward the current public arts program director talked to me about how the money spent went back into the state.

**Ed:** [00:27:38] *The reality about that project and the reality about a lot of the public art that gets built in this city and it's an untold story is that, yes, artists are hired to design and think up new ideas. But most of the people who build the public art in Phenix and*

*throughout the nation are small shop fabricators, construction trades.*  
[00:27:59][20.3]

**Ed:** [00:28:01] *And so when public art happens, that money often flows into the economy in fairly interesting ways* [00:28:09][8.2]

[28.6]

When I asked the couple how they felt getting such harsh backlash they expressed frustration. But at the same time they were appreciated that people engaged with their art.

**Mags:** [00:33:44] *If you do a public piece and there's no reaction, then it's probably not a good piece.* [00:33:51][7.4]

**Mags:** [00:37:40] *I think a piece is successful when it engages. And, you know, that's the most we can help hope for. And maybe it knows some of the satisfying moments in terms of our careers. When someone was against the piece, then it's to love the piece. After a while, I think that that is huge.* [00:38:05][24.8]

Who knows if those pranksters changed their minds over the years but the project went on to win local awards.

According to the Smithsonian Institution's Museum of American Art, "Vessels have special significance in the Southwest as containers of water and special planting environments in the arid climate. The form is also universal, with a history of simple function and high art.

Eventually the sound walls of the SR-51 were raised so the six pots on top of the walls were moved to storage. They are currently on display at a Deer Valley Water Treatment Plant.

**(cue music here)**

This story isn't only about the artists' process or about public controversy. It's also about public art. Why does it matter? And what is its function in society? Here's what Edward had to say.

**Ed:** [00:09:24] *so when you ask what is public art, public art, if you're designing a city, is every aspect of the city.* [00:09:32][8.3]

There are many different definitions of what public art can be. Think about the statues in New England of our founding fathers or the Chicago Cloud Gate or better known as the Bean. Its a public art installation that attracts [millions](#) of visitors each year. I asked Mags and Lajos why they thought it was important that cities continue to invest in public art.

**Lajos:** [00:39:49] Well, because it teaches you a lot about where you live, about your city about your community. [00:39:55][6.1]

**Mags:** [00:40:58] But what's really important is a sense of place of uniqueness of place. [00:41:07][9.1]

Public art can be unique and engaging. But to Edward, he looks at it in a different way.

**Ed:** [00:32:44] *whenever we can expand the functionality or usefulness of our infrastructure to take on different purposes, we're actually expanding the public's benefit of investment in those things* [00:32:59][14.9]

Mags and Lajos went on to work on other projects in Arizona such as the Salt River Project at Arizona Falls. The collaboration with SRP and the City of Phoenix named WaterWorks has been called a hidden gem. The couple still works in designing public art around the country. And even though they received backlash from Wall Cycle they still look at the experience fondly.

**Mags:** [00:34:29] *and it generated memories, which is what lajos said. And that's really that's pretty good.* [00:34:38][8.7]

**(OUT CUE MUSIC)**

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**Kaila:** Thanks Maritza for that in depth look into the Wall Cycle to Ocotillo. Is there any updates on this project?

Maritza: Actually yes. Next year the public arts program will commissioning funds to repaint some of the pots that have faded over time.

**Kaila: (response)** Well, that's it for today.

If you have more questions about how metro Phoenix is changing, submit them to us at [valley101.azcentral.com](http://valley101.azcentral.com). And if you're a new listener, remember you can go back and listen to old episodes. Let us know what you think by leaving us a rating or review on your podcast-listening app. As always, thank you for listening to Valley 101, a podcast from *The Arizona Republic* and [azcentral.com](http://azcentral.com). See you next week.