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Art in Public Spaces: Commissioned versus Unsanctioned

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KEYWORDS

Art, public space, sculpture, Street Art, Graffiti, Performance Art, the right to the city, democracy, artification, commodification, gentrification, illegal art, memorials, the third space, diversity, exclusion, interactive art, popular aesthetics, policy-making, the role of art.

SYNTHESIS

The specific issues of art in public spaces has been a predominant theme in my research as I have always been interested in analyzing both the artist's relationship with society and with the existing power structures. Because it affects a larger number of people and because it is itself affected by the opinions and decisions of other types of individuals that have no influence over art in general, it can be considered that the art in public spaces belongs in a different category. Since in the public space different rules seem to apply to art, they have to be taken into account and properly analyzed, for the sake of formulating a specific theory that applies to these art forms. The art in public spaces can also cause a different set of consequences than the one in museums, galleries, and private collections. It has the power not only to reach and to possibly inspire a larger audience, but at the same time it has the ability to raise questions on how public space can and should be used and by whom. These potential issues take us farther than the realms of art as they reach more fundamental aspects, so much so that we can consider the specific instances of art in public spaces as a symptom of the state of our society. In this case, the answers to the problems of public art could eventually also bring about an actual improvement to areas of deeper sensibilities. Albeit utopist, it still seems plausible that a better understanding of what best functions in public spaces when it comes to art, could lead in an overall better understanding of society's needs and wishes, which constitutes a worthy endeavor.

It is true that there is an extensive literature on public art, especially in the years following the shift in paradigm from Modernism to Postmodernism. These studies navigate the changes suffered by art that went from monumental and memorial to minimalist, to site-specific and eventually towards a more inclusive and participatory approach in order to better suit the

environment. However even though the trends have been identified and explored no clear consensus has been reached as the path is treacherous and filled with dilemmas due to the variables in policy-making. Perhaps this is also why there seems to be a lack of studies concerned with artworks that are in the public space even though they have not been commissioned by authorities, but rather they were given off as loans or gifts by the artists, which are self-funded. Like in the case of Christo which will be discussed later on, some of these artworks have obtained all the proper legal approvals in order to be placed in a public space, so while they are not commissioned they are still very much legal, but not taken into consideration under the term 'public art'. For the sake of clarity and continuity with other research on this topic, here too this term will only be used in reference to the commissioned works, while a proper distinction will be made for all others.

An entirely different aspect is constituted by the unsanctioned artworks that are encountered in the public space. Not only are they not commissioned, but they rarely have or even ask for permission and are thus illegal. They in turn are differentiated into several categories: performance pieces, Graffiti, and Street Art. The notoriety of the last two practices has without any doubt been aided by the widespread use of the Internet, and in this era of instant dissemination of images, both Graffiti and Street Art reach impressive and otherwise unattainable audiences. At the same time their apparently brief existence on the walls and streets becomes permanent in the vast databases of pictures dedicated to these phenomena. Against common practice, for the present research the distinction, terminological but not only, between Graffiti and Street Art is of great importance, as it could be the key to understanding the public's reactions towards each of the practices. Despite the notable increase in both scholarly and journalistic articles on these subjects, little to no connection of these illegal artistic practices has been made to Henri Lefebvre's equally popular thesis on the 'right to the city'. This will be one of the central points of this study and its novelty as both Graffiti and Street Art could arguably be expressions of demands that seek to challenge the current *status quo*.

Even though the public space is considered by many a democratic space, a space of inclusion, where different people are expected to converge, it is exactly this vast difference, that is most likely to cause a rift between the ideology of public space and the real-life practices enacted within these spaces. All the while the opposite is in fact true, and public spaces have always painted a picture of exclusion ever since the Greek agora, the democratic space *par*

excellence, where only free men were considered citizens. It is this perspective that drives a departure from the concept of public sphere as theorized by Jürgen Habermas as abstract and universal realm of democracy, and towards a more pragmatic one of public space as an actual and problematic site. The research will draw conclusions from the area specific to Art History and theory of art in the usage of terms and ideas especially when analyzing certain works of art or methods of operation. The discourse will be centered, as stated above on the sociological dimension as formulated by Lefebvre and others, but it will also briefly dwell on aspects of aesthetics. The theory of popular aesthetics as developed by Pierre Bourdieu will play a crucial role in determining whether or not this could lend a valid explanation in the success or lack thereof of certain artworks in the public space.

The premises on which this study is based have to do with the observation that often the commissioned public artworks are not particularly well received by their intended audience, while at the same time in an apparent paradox, the illegal ones are much loved and even turned into icons. The reasons for this could be in the fact that commissioned art is rarely chosen by the future public, and rather thrust upon them, but also because it often follows the principle of institutional art while not paying attention to the fact that the general folk is not comprised of art specialist or even museum goers. This manages to alienate the audiences, which at best simply ignore the artworks. However there have been cases in which the audiences were so outraged that they demanded their removal, which points to a failure on behalf of both the works themselves and the selection process. It could well be that elitist artworks that have won the praise of critics and other members of the artworld are ill-suited for the public space, as this scene is known to lean towards eremitism. On the other hand we have the Street Art pieces that somehow manage to draw a crowd of fans, which could eventually prompt the legalization of this art form. Street Art is much more inclusive and its message is delivered more clearly and accessible to basically everyone it comes into contact with, which can of course be considered a great advantage. Surprisingly enough, this argument is reinforced by the way people react to Graffiti. This is not nearly as popular as Street Art, quite the contrary, it is highly regarded as a delinquency, which could be explained in its own closed aesthetics accessible only to those in the know. It too manages to alienate the masses which do not understand it, much in the same way overly conceptual public art does, which may be at the root of all its acceptance problems.

This being said, the central thesis of this research aims to clarify the methods art in public space should employ in order to be accepted and even beloved by its audience, while at the same time making sure it avoids the situation where it becomes of a lower quality, by only seeking to please. That is of course a risk when something tries to appeal to everyone at the same time, but as we will see later on, it can be avoided through a series of strategies. Another point of the study takes into account the way newer forms of art could and perhaps should reach support and acceptance in order for the public space to truly become available and free to all its users. The lesser heard voices of the people will be a key in understanding exactly why illegal artworks are used in order to reclaim a public space, which may be the reason why they are likeable. The methodology adopted throughout the paper makes sure to introduce and define all the terms adopted from similar research and then to verify the application of these theories for public art, Street Art, and Graffiti all the while using relevant examples in order to make the point.

The results which are to be expected rely on evaluating the artists' options when working in the public space. This will eventually provide a theoretical 'how to'/'how not to' guide, not only for creating art in public spaces, but also for managing it from the perspective of the decision-makers. This is of utmost importance if we are to actually find a practical solution for a better use of public space and if possible to fight against its complete privatization which is where things currently seem to be heading. The role of education will be greatly highlighted, both when it comes to educating the general public about art, and public education as a domain onto itself. Even though the latter is not a core point of the thesis, using artistic education in order to bring people closer to contemporary art should indeed be taken into consideration. When it comes to the placement of art in public spaces, it would seem that the ivory tower of the artworld is not a viable solution, and quite frankly slightly insulting, especially if the artworks are funded by taxpayers' money, since they should at least get to enjoy it. There are examples in which a reputable artist made an arguably brilliant work, if not for the context. Museum-goers and gallery visitors get to choose to be exposed to whatever is deemed acceptable by the curators, gallerists, and critics, however to impose the same artworld rules to the general public is a questionable practice, to say the least. This of course goes both ways, as it does not seem to be the authorities' function to decide which illegal pieces get to be erased, especially when they do not occupy a public building, but a privately owned one.

Other issues to be clarified are the ones concerning the status of Graffiti and Street Art by analyzing the state of some processes that have been associated with them. A particularly concerning trend is that of the commodification of these practices, which according to interpretations has turned them soft, and they no longer are the voices of anarchy. Although it is questionable if they ever really were, this aspect will be amply disputed especially in the case of Graffiti. Another process, generally seen as having a more positive effect, is that of artification. Lastly the process of gentrification will also be evaluated alongside the use of Street Art. Gentrification is important in connection to Lefebvre's thesis on the 'right to the city' as well as to the current practices that make it appear more or less inevitable. However the role of Street Art is hard to properly establish because of existing conflicts between the artists intention and the final result, but it is an interesting and important aspect nonetheless.

Another mention that should clearly be stated is that while I consider this thesis to be generally applicable, it is an assumed decision that the issues presented here are very specific to the Western world and may not be relevant for other cultural areas. There will even be a distinction between European versus American policies that is dictated by their different approaches to culture. Although a brief history on the usage of public space and its monuments is much needed, the aim of this study is to bring light to the current trends and events, considering only works from the late modernist period up to this day. In fact these instances create the most confusion and are also the most relevant for contemporary society that needs to face them.

the thesis will be structured into three chapters, which will tackle each of these different themes as well as their interconnection. The first chapter will be address the notion of public space itself in order to create a framework for the following aspects. The public space will be analyzed from a philosophical as well as a sociological perspective, mostly leaving out the strictly legal one. I will draw on the writings of Peter Sloterdijk on macrospherology, those of Michel de Certeau, and particularly those of Henri Lefebvre. The way public space has been used throughout the ages will be presented here, mainly to underline how this apparently democratic space was mostly one of exclusion. The utopia of a public space at the disposition of *all* the members of society is still maintained to this day, but the hypocrisy of this is easy to see. The use and the abuse of public areas will thus be the main coordinates of this chapter, and of the entire dissertation, as the space increasingly becomes a battlefield in which different forms of visual art fight for the attention of the passersby. Lefebvre's concept of 'the right to the city' will be

analyzed in relation to the unsanctioned artistic practices. Despite the fact that this concept has become an almost overused phrase, it has not yet been connected to Graffiti or Street Art. This needs to be remedied seeing as though some of these actions have arguably been constructed precisely on this theory proposed by the French sociologist. The thesis underlining question will remain: 'Who truly has the right to decide which art belongs to the public space?' by also offering a solution for bettering the life of participants in the public space.

The second chapter will be concentrate on public art, namely commissioned pieces. Sculpture will be analyzed almost exclusively due to the fact that it is by far the most prominent art form chosen for these commissioned artworks, although a case for the rise of installations can also be made. The main goal here will be to observe how consecrated artists and their works are able to function in the public space. The specificity of these spaces creates an entirely different context than that of the museum or gallery, and thus not all artists can or even wish, to create works that are suitable for this enlarged audience. In order to better express these variable situations, some examples have been taken under consideration, from the point of view of the public's reactions to the art works. From the debacle of Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc*, to the much beloved sculptures of Anish Kapoor, to the works of Antony Gromley and Damien Hirst, we will try to understand the emotions that vary from indifference to fury. The particularities of art in public spaces need to be observed and accepted in order to gain a better understanding of the expectations of everyone involved in the process. This is of high importance especially for the artworld professional that tend to ignore the fact that an artworks success in these spaces in not at all determined by their opinion. The artist's reputation in itself, which is a great deal in terms of the artmarket or other institutional affairs, has little to no importance, and all that eventually matters is the work itself. This is supported by several examples, with the mention that if an artist makes a name for himself in the public space, it will of course greatly improve his popularity, and raise his stakes, even in the artmarket. The best example for this is without doubt Banksy, along with an increasing number of street artists.

The third and final chapter will come to analyze the illicit artistic practices in the public space. It will take under consideration Performance Art, although briefly because its specificity does not imply either a lasting effect or any sort of property damage, like it is the case with Graffiti and Street Art. Despite the fact that police does sometimes show up at performance pieces and shuts them down, they tend to be taken more lightly as solitary, rather than the

epidemic of the others. Due to the fact that for most researchers' methodology the difference between Graffiti and Street Art is irrelevant, there seems to be no clear consensus on the utilization of these terms as they are used interchangeably even inside the artistic community. However studies concerning the history of these practices do make an obvious distinction, and even the existence of two separate terms point towards the fact that Street Art has become something that Graffiti is not. The differences are substantial and on many levels, and are particularly important for the present study as it could explain the vast differences in the perception over these two art forms. The confusion is further enhanced by the common use of the word 'graffiti' in order to determine both the art form that began in the late 60s in the United States of America, as well as the myriad of different written statements and remarks that have graced the public walls ever since the Roman Empire. One of the aims of this study is to clearly and unequivocally formulate a distinction between them for practical reason that will be in the interest of future scholarly research.

An altogether different discussion will be that concerning the rise of the Internet in the recent decades which has without doubt reshaped many of our established practices and continues to do so as it infiltrates more and more of our activities. From research to shopping, from the esoteric to the mundane, few areas have remained out of its reach and Street Art is certainly not one of those. This paper aims to shed some light on the way this has influenced the un-commissioned, illegal, artistic practices and to what effect. It is another goal of this research to revisit how these multiple effects have been perceived and how they changed the overall view on Street Art. A wider audience often brings an increase in popularity which is important for the legitimization and artification processes, generally considered to be a positive direction. However the same notoriety can be identified as a cause for the commodification of Street Art practices, to which the response is much more negative as the discourses somehow tie this aspect of Street Art to its yet uncertain role in gentrification, despite the fact that this mostly stands against the ideology of the street artists' themselves. Opinions on Street Art vary greatly and it is regarded either as a victor, a victim or a villain, depending on the filter one uses to construct an argument. It is precisely this multiplicity I wish to explore while trying to show the role played by the Internet in what we see in the public space.

Hopefully the outcome of this endeavor will prove itself to be of practical utility not only as a novel way to approach Graffiti and Street Art from a philosophical and a sociological

perspective, but also as way to seek improvement on the policies of public space. It will also aim to clarify a proper usage of terms that is important if research in this area will continue to extend. Lastly, without wishing to fall towards a populist solution, a change is much needed in the way public space is used and administrated, since even though discourses aim towards a larger degree of inclusion, the social realities of today would beg disagree. What is worse is that the discourses without finality only push the matter further into ignorance by painting a hopeful picture. This has a result the fact that today's society is inclined to not notice the segregation that continues to expand in the public spaces, despite the fact that it is a current and real issue.

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