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Public Art? Examining the Differences between Contemporary Sculpture inside and outside the Art Institution

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Public Art? Examining the Differences between Contemporary Sculpture inside and outside the Art Institution

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Abstract

This text explores three main differences between a sculpture installed within a museum and a sculpture installed in public space. It analyses the institutional framework, the relationship between the viewer and the artwork, the nature of the audience. The authors argue that there are key differences that require correspondingly different ways of understanding, conceiving and making sculptural projects in public space.

When installed in public space, art encounters a whole new environment: conventional museum procedures and attitudes are no longer applicable. Sculptures installed in public space lack clear institutional reference points that would confer them the status of art, so they automatically settle in beside other urban objects, in a diffuse and mixed zone. New approaches must be found that take into account the specificities of public space, the local context and the establishing of dialogue with the local community. Moreover, the evaluation of these projects should depart from mere aesthetic considerations and take on board ideas and methodologies from other disciplines. With regards to a broadened, diversified and participatory audience, it would make only sense to involve them as an intrinsic part of a more collaborative notion of sculpture and public art.

Keywords: Public sculpture, context, audience, participatory art, contemporary art



¿Arte público? Examinando las Diferencias entre la Escultura Contemporánea dentro y fuera de la Institución Artística

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Resumen

Este texto investiga las principales diferencias entre una escultura instalada en el espacio público y la misma instalada dentro del museo, analizando el marco institucional, la relación espectador-obra, y la naturaleza de la audiencia en ambos casos. Los autores sostienen que existen diferencias sustanciales que requerirían implementar modos diferentes de entender, concebir o realizar proyectos escultóricos en el espacio público.

Cuando se instala en el espacio público, el arte confronta un contexto totalmente nuevo: ya no sirven los procedimientos habituales del museo. Las esculturas instaladas en el exterior carecen del marco institucional que les confiera el estatus de arte, pasando automáticamente a ser parte de una zona difusa y mixta, junto a los otros objetos urbanos. Se necesitan nuevos enfoques que tengan en cuenta las especificidades del espacio público, el contexto local, y que establezcan un proceso de diálogo con la comunidad. Además, la evaluación de estos proyectos debe emanciparse de la pura estética, incorporando ideas y metodologías de otras disciplinas. Y con respecto a un nuevo tipo de audiencia: expandida, diversificada y participativa, sería lógico involucrarla como parte intrínseca en proyectos basados en una noción más colaborativa de escultura y arte público.

Palabras clave: Escultura pública, contexto, audiencia, arte participativo, arte contemporáneo

Art's role in our society will not be effectively established until it permeates our social systems and is not thought of as just something that happens inside the doors of a museum. Working outside the institution –in other sites, with everyday means, with daily issues– is a start in shifting the ideological position of art in our culture. (Jacob, 1995, p. 60)

What are the differences between a sculpture inside a museum and the same sculpture installed in public space? A first difference: unlike inside a museum, sculptures installed in public space lack an institutional framework that would confer them a clear status of art. Once in public space, these pieces automatically settle beside all the other urban objects, in a diffuse and mixed zone. Here we must first differentiate between public space and outdoors. Thomas Hirschhorn says that his projects take place where people live, and that “exhibiting in the sculpture garden of a museum is not public space—it’s only ‘outside’” (Lookofsky, 2013). And another basic question: what do we understand by art in public space? Senie (2018, p. 1) considers it to be “any work that is accessible free of charge to a general audience –something they encounter during their everyday lives that is not predicated on a trip to a museum”. As a point of departure, we can turn to the creation of the Art in Public Places Program as part of the National Endowment for the Arts in 1967 and the later establishment of state and city percent-for-art programs. Both began in the United States and together, they have shaped the way we internationally know and accept public art today. When the first contemporary sculptures got installed in public space in the 1960s: the Chicago Picasso in 1967 or Alexander Calder’s *La Grande Vitesse* (1969), and all the following in the 1970s, this opened up a new set of challenges. Those sculptures were “closely related in style to their smaller counterparts in collections and signified the expansion outdoors of the private museum viewing experience” (Jacob, 1995, p. 53). While traditional sculptural pieces were often unsuitable for the public space, museum exhibition conventions were nonetheless simply relocated to the outside space. “Although the move to exhibit art in public places was a progressive one, the majority of artists accommodated themselves to the established museums system, continuing to focus their attention on art critics and museum-going connoisseurs” (Lacy, 1995, p. 24). This resulted in a series of enlarged museum pieces installed outside, using standard museum procedures. As such, “the controversy they engendered necessarily centered

around artistic style (that is, abstract versus figurative art), rather than around public values” (Jacob, 1995, p. 53). But these “public values” cannot be ignored; rather, they need to be at the very centre of the public art debate.



Image 1. Serra, R. (1981-89). *Tilted Arc* [Destroyed]. © 1987 Marc Treib

The awareness of the need to adapt to the new situation appears only after some time and a number of controversies. The most notable of these controversial artworks would probably be Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc*, installed 1981 in Federal Plaza in New York. According to Finkelpearl (2000), immediately after installation people who worked in the nearby offices began to complain that the enormous structure blocked views and paths. There was a campaign to remove the sculpture, which initially proved unsuccessful. But when Ronald Reagan became president of the United States in 1984, he appointed a new republican administration throughout the federal bureaucracy and the case of *Tilted Arc* was reopened. The trial became a “battle” between leftist intellectuals against the workers from the Federal Building, including secretaries, managers, lawyers, and government workers, also from nearby buildings. Serra testified that the sculpture was site-specific, and that removing it from its site would destroy the artwork. Part of the defence claimed that works of art required time before they would be understood by the broader public. The workers felt insulted by such claims and were

outraged that they were treated as ignorant. Finally, Serra lost the trial and the artwork was dismantled in 1989 (Finkelpearl, 2000, p. 60-79). *Tilted Arc* was defined by some art critics as an arrogant gesture by the artist, a “sculpture imposed from above” (Lippard, 1997, p. 265) and one that appeared threatening and intimidating. Many others in the art world defended it. But “while Serra had been a ‘process artist’, the process never included a two-way public dialogue” (Finkelpearl, 2000, p. 65). Serra's trial is cited as the most notorious controversy surrounding a public sculpture, and shook the foundations of public art. In turn, the field came to recognise the need to adapt to new ways of working in order to avoid similar disputes. “The ripple effect of the *Tilted Arc* controversy was great (...) in 1990, there had been a re-evaluation of public art in the United States. Administrators all over the country revised their procedures for commissioning work”. The new premise stated that the audience “must be included in the process” (Finkelpearl, 2000, p. 65). The controversy with *Tilted Arc* demonstrated how certain aspects are essential to the conception and making of a public art project: the importance of considering the context and establishing a dialogue with the community, the need to include the audience in the process of creation and to calibrate the reaction of the local community. Art in public space does not work like it would in a white cube, and *Tilted Arc* taught us how aesthetics cannot be the only factor for a successful artwork in public space. The newest art theories are not as applicable once they are taken outside the museum, given the ambivalence of “art” as a status in public space.

The Relationship between the Viewer and the Artwork

This brings us to the second difference: the relationship between the viewer and the sculpture in public space is different than that which takes place within the museum. And even if museums nowadays increasingly show interactive and site-specific pieces, there are certain things that can only happen outside its confines, such as working with communities and relating to local realities. This includes situation-specific artworks, community engagement, ecological interventions, activist approaches. But how might we talk about aesthetic contemplation in these contexts? Cameron (2004, p. 21) writes about a “distracted viewing” of public art: “While there are many ways of viewing art, not all of them require voluntary participation on the viewer's part”. We don't look at public art in the same way we look at museum-art. “Distracted viewing” doesn't mean invisibility, a diminished interest in public artworks, or a danger of being taken less seriously. It is simply a different way of looking

at and enjoying art, which in our opinion, would make it more similar to the way we experience architecture or urban design in our cities. Art can happen anywhere today; it is part of our lives. Enjoying art shouldn't be restricted to the occasions when we go to the museum. If under *white cube* conditions "the success of the encounter is predicated on having one's attention fully absorbed by the art on display, to the deliberate exclusion of all surrounding elements of the visual environment" (Cameron, 2004, p. 21), then we cannot apply the same framework to public spaces. The idealised conditions of the *white cube* are not necessarily part of the art equation anymore, and so the way of looking at and interpreting art must be different too. This means that traditional aesthetic contemplation must adapt to public space. And this has a very interesting consequence: "By catching us unawares, art can have an impact that might not be possible in an environment where one has consciously prepared for what one is going to see" (Cameron, 2004, p. 21). Public artworks can offer a *surprise factor* that art in museums and indoor art institutions cannot: a twist in the experiencing of the everyday (Llobet Sarria & Fernández Pons, 2020, p. 83).

But if "distracted viewing" is a common way of enjoying public art nowadays, there are also some interesting cases that would bring this way of looking at art to its extreme consequences: namely, to a *self-conscious invisibility* (Llobet Sarria & Fernández Pons, 2020, p. 83). In Renata Lucas' *Kunst-Werke (Cabeça e cauda de cavalo)* (2010), the artist cut the sidewalk and part of the road in a large circular shape of several meters in diameter, "rotating" it exactly 7.5 degrees anticlockwise. This surreal effect was accomplished by simply removing all of the paving tiles, cobblestones and other objects in the pathway and by placing them back a bit further. The impression of the viewer is that the whole pavement may have really been spun by some strange force. The artwork was installed at the entrance gate of KW Institute for Contemporary Art, a central gallery location on Auguststrasse in Berlin's Mitte district. While Lucas' project has some formal and conceptual reminiscence to Gordon Matta-Clark and Michael Asher, its poetry and sense of humour set her artwork apart, bringing it into a new direction. Lucas' intervention is effectively camouflaged, almost unnoticeable. And although easily overlooked, those passers-by who do happen upon the artwork are sure to experience a sense of displacement and question how and why the floor has been rotated. "Perhaps the most effective audience for her acts of insurrection, therefore, is the unwary one – the surprised passerby who can see something is amiss but can't immediately explain that 'something' with the label of art" (Basciano, 2015). This type of

intervention shows how public art can catch our attention through “distracted viewing”: by playing with becoming almost unnoticeable, such works can be even more significant for those who see them, and so avoid the apparent state of invisibility of many other art pieces in public space (Llobet Sarria & Fernández Pons, 2020).



Image 2. Lucas, R. (2010). *Kunst-Werke (Cabeça e Cauda de Cavalo)* [Urban intervention]. © 2010 Renata Lucas. Reprinted with permission of the artist.



Image 3. Lucas, R. (2010). Kunst-Werke (Cabeça e Cauda de Cavalo) (2nd part of installation) [Urban intervention]. © 2010 Renata Lucas. Reprinted with permission of the artist.

Another example would be Andreas Slominski's *Ausheben der Laterne für das Umlegen des Reifens* [Raising of Street Lamp for Placing of Tire] (1996). As the title suggests, this unusual and seemingly spontaneous intervention consisted of putting a bicycle tire through a streetlamp. The resulting scene appears mundane and non-artistic, until the viewer realises that there would be only two possible ways to achieve this urban composition: either by throwing the tyre up until it loops around the lamp, most likely with help of a very long ladder; or by detaching the lamp from the ground and inserting the tyre from underneath. The latter would be a much more complicated and expensive procedure, but is in fact what took place here. Slominski never opts for the easy approach. To bring this piece to life, street tiles had to be removed and later put back to its original place; electricity was disconnected; a crane and several workers were hired to dig out, lift up, and put the structure back in place. The intervention took place on November 27, 1996 on the Adenauerallee Avenue in Münster, Germany, during one of the many research visits Slominski made prior to his participation in 1997's *Skulptur Projekte Münster*. In his observations of everyday scenes, the artist decided to imitate

some children's game of throwing a tyre over the top of a pole. Because the intervention took place months in advance, it was no longer available for view by the time the exhibition opened. But this didn't seem to bother Slominski. What remained of the artwork was only in the memory of the artist and the workers. And while *Ausheben* was probably overlooked by most passers-by – with hardly a trace of the extraordinary work it took to make it happen – the artist relies on the catalogue of the exhibition so his project won't be ignored and lost forever. The work of Slominski is exactly about this absurdity: actions that seem to lead to nothing. The extreme efforts to make this artwork and the helpless feeling afterwards indicate how an easy action may be much more difficult to carry out than it first appears. In this case, even “distracted viewing” is made impossible. As with some other projects by Slominski, it is not about the result but the process involved in creating the artwork. It is *self-conscious invisibility*.

These changes in the relationship between the viewer and the sculpture in public space require other infrastructural changes in public art, e.g. in the commissioning of artworks. As Willis (2008, p. 153) asks: “Is it more practical to adopt the curatorial and education process of museums to commission public artworks or is public art better served by the procedures used in architecture and urban design?” New approaches could be useful for the evaluation of public art projects, too. Artists increasingly work in mixed disciplines and it would only make sense to broaden art's scope of evaluation. According to Rendell (2008, p. 45) “a growing number of artists engage in territories usually associated with urban design and architecture” and “these artists adopt design-like working methods, for example, responding to a need or fixing things that are broken, activities that would usually fit within the architect's brief or the repair and maintenance schedule”. How do we deal with these kind of artworks? A critique of such works based only on artistic criteria cannot be the answer. Rather, we would need to find and apply new ways of evaluating public art besides aesthetic concerns, just like lamps, benches or buildings are evaluated by questions of feasibility, accessibility, energy efficiency, mobility, adaptability, amenity, legibility, movement, or permeability.



Image 2. Slominski, A. (1996) Ausheben der Laterne für das Umlegen des Reifens [Raising of Street Lamp for Placing of Tire] [Urban intervention]. Reprinted from *Contemporary sculpture: projects in Münster 1997* (p. 399) [Exhibition's catalogue]. K. Bußmann, K. König, F. Matzner (eds.) 1997. Gerd Hatje. © 1996 Roman Mensing and artdoc.de. Reprinted with permission of Roman Mensing.

The Nature of the Audience

Finally, the third difference: the audience for public art is radically different from that of the museum. Douglas Crimp, one of Richard Serra's greatest defenders when he realised *Tilted Arc*, says in an interview that "people who come to a museum or who work in a museum are already a specific, self-selected group, unlike the people who passed by *Tilted Arc*" (Finkelppearl, 2000, p. 68). So, the audience for public art is not comparable and cannot be treated the same way as the audience inside the art institution. Lacy (1995) theorised the nature of new diverse audiences for a type of socially engaged, interactive public artworks, which she called *New Genre Public Art* (*N.G.P.A.*). Lacy explains how artists have achieved a level of public visibility never seen before, and that public art includes a "broad and diversified" audience, all of whom differently contribute to the public debate. Kravagna (1998, p. 3) refers to this type of art and notes that "the *N.G.P.A.* is first of all and primarily interested in a definition of its audience", reason being that "local resistance to 'art in public space' and the ensuing discussions (see Serra's 'Tilted Arc') showed that the question of the audience had not been taken seriously enough by the conventional public art programs".

Today's audience is "broad and diversified" in nature, and they are grossly ignored. Another distinctive feature of the public art audience is its inherent sense of participation. Sheikh (2004) writes about new models and formations of the public sphere that bring a new participatory model for spectatorship "as opposed to a (modernist) generalized one". This means reconfiguring the public sphere "into a potential multitude of different, overlapping spheres and formations". As such, we must acknowledge the "fragmentation and differentiation of the public sphere on the one hand, and of an expansion and/or dematerialization of art works on the other" (2004).

An example of participatory audience can be found at Thomas Hirschhorn's monument projects. *Bataille Monument* was realized in 2002 at Nordstadt, a suburb on the periphery of Kassel, as part of Documenta 11. The project consisted of a series of temporary architectural constructions made out of ephemeral materials: plywood, packing tape and plastic foil. There was a TV studio, an information point, a temporary bar operated by a local family, a thematic library, and a monument sculpture in the shape of a tree, amongst other things. All these were made possible with the cooperation of local residents, who also took care of the temporary structures (and were paid for their work). An interesting part was that visitors could only arrive to the project using a special taxi shuttle service departing from Documenta. Once

there, visitors must remain at Hirschhorn's project until there was an available return taxi. This created a certain feeling of being stranded in the middle of nowhere. "Rather than the local populace becoming subject to what he calls the 'zoo effect', Hirschhorn's project made the art public feel like hapless intruders". Another interesting point of this project is that it "took the local inhabitants seriously as potential Bataille readers" (Bishop, 2005, p. 124). All of Hirschhorn's monument projects seek to make encounters with the *oeuvre* of philosophers and thinkers as part of our everyday, though at a different level than usual. "I make monuments for philosophers because they have something to say today (...) even if I don't understand the third part of their reflexion" (Hirschhorn, 2001, p. 398). Visitors (as much as the artist himself) are not supposed to understand or share the thinkers' ideas, but to be confronted with them. In his proposal text for *24h Foucault*, a project that was presented at Palais de Tokyo in October 2003, Hirschhorn (2006) wrote that even though he doesn't know Foucault's philosophy, "it permits me to approach it, to not understand it but to seize it, to see it, to be active with it. I don't have to be a historian, a connoisseur, a specialist to confront myself". Like *Bataille Monument*, Hirschhorn's other monument projects –*Deleuze Monument* (2000), *Gramsci Monument* (2013), or *Robert Walser-Sculpture* (2019)– function collectively as a critique of the very notion of monument. These are monuments not imposed from above, but created in collaboration and with the participation of local residents. Additionally, they are not meant to last forever: they are temporary. "I try to make a new kind of monument. A precarious monument. A monument for a limited time" (Hirschhorn, 2001, p. 398). For these projects Hirschhorn engages salaried local neighbours throughout the creation process: they help him build his ephemeral structures and enliven them with contents and their participation in the many related programmes.

On a research trip we interviewed Kathleen Bühler (personal communication, February 25, 2019), curator of Thomas Hirschhorn's *Robert Walser-Sculpture* (2019), and she explained how they planned to be on site for 3 months to realise this project for *Schweizerische Plastikausstellungen Biel* (2019). Artist and curator had been working since 2016 on the project and started 35 cooperations with people from Biel. They had collaborated with the local networks from the very beginning. If there has been so far little vandalism in Hirschhorn's previous projects in public space, it is partly because of this type of cooperation and involvement of the local community. If community is ignored, in the most acute cases people can react negatively, even violently towards the artworks. This was precisely the case in the 1980

edition of this same exhibition, a case study of vandalism of public art explained in detail by Gamboni (1997). The installed artworks all around the city generated a feeling of “double exclusion” (from art and from public space) on people. The lack of involvement caused a negative reaction from the local community, who perceived the exhibition as an invasion, and as an elitist show that excluded neighbours “from the cultural practices that gave the sculptures their meaning, and from the public places temporarily dedicated to these practices” (1997, p. 220). Instead, the local community is involved in Hirschhorn's pieces with a no-spectator philosophy, and from the conception of the exhibition to its daily maintenance. The artist's projects are always temporary, very intense and confusing, with lots of daily activities offered over several months. Hirschhorn takes on multiple roles of supervisor and caretaker, and he makes himself available at all times to keep the project alive. The artist is always there, through the whole creation process and until the dismantling of the monument. Hirschhorn has implemented very ambitious projects with the help of people. What sets his practice apart from other community-based art projects is the centring of this participation process. Kravagna (1998, p. 3) argues that in most participatory projects “one of the central points of this artistic self-understanding is the switch from the symbolic level to the level of the ‘real’”. Hirschhorn's projects consist of participatory interventions in the realm of the real, but he is also very much concerned with how those projects function at a symbolic level. Hirschhorn doesn't want to “Heal the World”, which was Kravagna criticism of Lacy's N.G.P.A. Rather, the idea guiding Thomas Hirschhorn's projects is: “I need to encounter a person who will help me, it's not me who brings help—it's me who needs help!” (Lookofsky, 2013). And although he sometimes straddles across genres—his projects have also been referred to as *socially engaged art*, an art making process involving people as the medium, in which participation is as important as the art object—Hirschhorn has repeatedly stated that he is not a social worker, and that his art objects are in the very centre of his practice. “Unlike many artists who work collaboratively in order to fuse art and social praxis, Thomas Hirschhorn has always asserted the importance of art's autonomy” (Bishop, 2006, p. 154).



Image 5. Hirschhorn, T. (2019). Robert Walser-Sculpture [Urban intervention]. <http://www.thomashirschhorn.com/robert-walser-sculpture>. © 2019 Enrique Muñoz García. Reprinted with permission of the artist and ESS/SPA Swiss Sculpture Exhibition



Image 3. Hirschhorn, T. (2019). Robert Walser-Sculpture (Thomas Hirschhorn during during Esperanto lesson with Parzival) [Urban intervention]. Photography: Dietrich Michael Weidmann [2019][CCBY-SA 4.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>)]

Conclusion

In this paper, we have examined the differences between a sculpture inside and outside the art institution and discussed them with regards to the institutional framework, the relationship between the viewer and the art, and the nature of the audience. Yet why do we keep installing museum art outdoors? Why do we critique these works based purely on aesthetic criteria? And why do we ignore the audience in public works of art? These differences must bring along changes in the way of understanding, conceiving and making sculptural projects in public space. New ways must be found that take into account the specificities of the public space, the local context and the establishing of dialogue with the local community. Moreover, the evaluation of these projects should depart from mere aesthetic considerations and take on board ideas and methodologies from other disciplines. A broad, diversified and participatory audience also means a more collaborative understanding of sculpture and public art. Current forms of public art still tend to be imposed from above and are largely unsuccessful amongst people. The processes that continue to shape public artworks are those of the art institution, perpetuating an elitist notion of public art. Once and for all, outdoor sculptures need to leap from their plinths and be amongst people, undoing its masterful, museum quality that makes it stick out like an object from another planet.

In her essay *Public Art as Publicity* (2002), Kwon revisits the categories first established by Raymond Williams in 1961 (i.e. authoritarian, paternalistic, commercial or democratic), but instead of referring to systems of communication or modes of publicity, Kwon applies those categories to public art. For example, in an *authoritarian* system of communication, values would be imposed by a few over many. This would similarly apply to artworks in public space. The *paternalistic* mode of communication is similar, but with a didactic attitude from the ruling group looking down upon the many. The *commercial* mode of communication opposes both of these and relies instead on the free market as a guarantor of freedom. But inevitably, other modalities of control enter the scene, such as the criteria of profitability. This brings us again to a reduced number of people controlling the media, as exemplified by projects in which artists are recruited “to provide amenities that would increase the property value of certain buildings and zones of gentrification”. Lastly, the *democratic* mode of communication “maximizes individual participation” and allows individuals to use and determine the programming of public institutions (e.g. theatres, televisions, newspapers). That is, “the modes of expression and communication and the means of their distribution

or dissemination are owned by the people who use them. And what is produced is decided by those who produce it”. Transposed to public art, the *democratic* mode would result in new models of participation and collaboration in the creation of art pieces, thus “challenging conventional power dynamics and hierarchies that sustain the contemporary art world” (Kwon, 2002).

In our opinion, it would make sense for all public sculpture practices to be embedded in more *democratic* processes, instead of getting stuck in *authoritarian* positions –or any other ones that presume the existence of an art knowledge that is superior to the lived experiences of the general public–. It follows that the selection, production and installation of sculptures in public space would be transparent and include those who will enjoy –or suffer– the artworks every day. In other words, sculptures and projects installed in public spaces must involve the audience as an intrinsic part of more participatory and collaborative practices. There are ways to steer public art towards a much-needed *democratisation* process, including: a selection of projects through public or semi-public open calls; guidelines that foreground an active observation of context; the participation of the community in the production and installation of the work; an evaluation of the neighbours’ assessment of the work.

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