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► **To cite this version:**

Pascale Ancel, Sylvia Girel. Art and the public space. Danko D.; Moeschler O.; Schumacher F. Kunst und Öffentlichkeit, Springer VS, pp.83-93, 2014, 10.1007/978-3-658-01834-4 . hal-01748988

HAL Id: hal-01748988

<https://hal.science/hal-01748988>

Submitted on 4 Mar 2019

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Pascale Ancel, Sylvia Girel. Art and the public space. *Kunst und Öffentlichkeit*, Danko D., Moeschler O., Schumacher F., (Hrsg), , 2014. [〈hal-01748988〉](#)

Art and the Public Space

Pascale Ancel, Sylvia Girel

In the public domain, the artistic expression embodies different forms which go from the most ›intellectual‹ and respondent to what one can see in the ›world of art‹ (installations, performances, videos etc.) to the most popular or alternative ones, like graffiti and flash mobs.¹ They all stem from esthetical, political and ethical projects. It would be impossible to account for all of them in the urban space, unless we follow Paul Ardenne's idea of contextual art, that is of unauthorised as well as legitimate actions implying the physical valorisation of the public sphere:

»With ›contextual‹ art we mean all the forms of art which differ from the work of art as it is understood traditionally, such as: militant and committed activist art (happenings in the public space, artistic movements etc.); art taking place in the public domain or in its landscape (street performances, situational landscape art...), and the forms of esthetical participation in the fields of economy, media or show business.« (Ardenne 2002: 11)

Even if it were possible to index the artistic work exposed in the public space, beyond its diversity, one could only note the common theme of its specific context, at the margins of the artistic world, therein sharing the limitations characteristic of such a context. Thus, to exhibit in this domain, which is shared by everybody and governed by social rules (social and juridical norms, rights and obligations meant to guarantee public welfare, security and order), necessarily changes the relationship to the audience. The visitor/member of the public does no longer move within an exhibition space, which is delimited by a specific physical area and framed by the conventions of the artistic world², but does so in a public space, with all its implications.

¹ This text – including all the citations, in French – was translated by Dafne Accoroni.

² One can notice that a number of rules are shared by different domains in the social world, together with others which may add to these. Among the constraints cited above are those which can alter the reception of the artistic work in the urban space, such as noise, traffic, advertising or random reactions.

Therefore, because our interest is now drawn to the *context*, we will follow Erving Goffman's conceptual model to show a few artistic *situations* that are potentially able to question the relationship to the public space.³ This will allow us to reflect on how the context impacts on creativity and to identify what the diffusion of art releases today in the public domain that might be different, if not always new.

According to an interactionist perspective, the *context* entails *experience* in the way Goffman defines it: »My phrase ›frame analysis‹ is a slogan to refer to the examination [...] of the organization of experience« (Goffman 1991: 19). This in turn refers back to the artist's ›practice‹, understood as »a system of conventions by which one given activity (already endowed with meaning by the enactment of a former model) transforms into another, which the participants feel as starkly different from the original one« (ibid.: 52). Indeed, the viewer needs to refer to a variety of frames in order to understand, describe and make sense of the artistic expression which takes place in the public domain.

Traditional artistic environments themselves determine the artistic quality of what is showed, which is not always the case for the public space, where the same event (or object) can also take on – even simultaneously – different qualities; one can find many examples of this. Some creations draw all of their meaning precisely from the fact of being outside the world of art, as the work of Maurizio Cattelan testifies, and more particularly the one realised at 24 Maggio Square, Milan – where the artist showed three mannequins representing children hanging from a tree. Cattelan's work was quickly withdrawn, but the incident, which received large media coverage, revealed the specificity and esthetical ›efficacy‹ of the work of art, achieved both through its nature and content as well as through the context (the public space) that surrounded it. One could measure the efficacy of the context from the ›relief‹ the audience felt when it understood that those were mannequins of a contemporary art installation. Conversely, one observes the loss of such an ›efficacy‹ once the same work is exposed at a museum.

Art in the street, street art or art with the street are just as many possible combinations to question the place and status of the onlooker who participates in these creative, artistic manifestations. Before showing some examples of the ways in which the public space is used artistically, we would like to remind here the definition provided by Jürgen Habermas in the 1960s: it is a »sphere where critical thinking exerts itself« through an »intellectual process during which individuals make the public sphere, otherwise controlled by the authority, their

³ Nathalie Heinich (1997) employed Goffman's conceptual model to analyse the audience's reception of/reaction to the Pont Neuf bridge in Paris, ›wrapped up‹ by Christo in 1985.

own« (Habermas 1988: 61). Over time, this definition has bent into a plurality of other meanings reflecting many more ways of dealing with the public space: from a place in turn symbolic, abstract and for debates, to a space that is real, concrete and for daily use (Dewey 2010), thus opening up a spectrum of possible definitions between these two, according to the point of view adopted (juridical, social and/or political). What is central to our analysis is that to exhibit the artistic object in the public space, and thus to ›expose‹ it, is a way of questioning the logic of such a space – although each artist will pursue it in different ways.

1. Public artworks

The first form of intervention in the public space concerns those works of art which become part of the public space. They are often state commissioned and thus financed by the community. Three famous examples highlight the difficulties confronting the artists accused of appropriating the public space (even classified historical sites), something that is perceived as an interference, all the more unacceptable since it is realised thanks to the tax-payers' money. Such an appropriation is found to be even more abusive in that it imposes itself to the onlooker as ›legitimate‹, even when the latter is not necessarily familiar with it and thus might be susceptible of feeling aggressed by it.

The most emblematic example is certainly Daniel Buren's artwork, *Les deux plateaux*, better known under the name of ›Buren's columns‹, which raised a storm in the media as much as in politics (Cascaro 1998), unprecedented in France until 1986. The debate, construed in terms of ›rejection‹ by Nathalie Heinich (1997), has revealed the audience's lack of understanding of those forms of art which do not correspond to its own definition of it. It is worth mentioning that outside of France, this piece of art is considered one of the best examples of integration within a historical site, and that over time the reaction has turned upside down: when the artwork was withdrawn for restoration, its absence encountered even greater disappointment. Perceived as disfiguring the public space when installed, it had then been incorporated as an integral object of that urban landscape.

Monumental sculptures shown at the 1980 Biennale Biennale were particularly prey to vandalism. Gamboni (1983) has recorded the negative reactions (both physical and verbal) to these sculptures. Notwithstanding the effort made by the organisers of the Biennale to inform the public, the economic crisis that the town of Biennale faced at that time fuelled the contestation against what was felt to represent the ›legitimate‹ culture. These sculptures exerted a specific form of symbolic violence to which a part of the public responded with acts

of concrete violence Gamboni defines as ›iconoclastic‹ (i.e. graffiti, deterioration and destruction).

Intervention in the public space never happens without risk of contestation and reactions can then reveal the values attached to the artistic production. Even if these works of art were not meant as a provocation, they still question the space and the way in which it is used, something that is often not understood. American sculptor Richard Serra experienced this painfully at the installation of his *Tilted Arc* in 1981 at Federal Square in New York. The government-funded monumental work (steel plates, 36.5m by 6.5m) hindered the circulation of the passersby and of the locals by modifying, unsettling and, most of all, by probing the conventional perception of that environment. Hence, the popular disavowal had the better of the situation. After many protests led by the users of the square and after months of lawsuits, the American judges ordered the destruction of the sculpture.

As we have seen, to intervene in the public space means questioning the habits of the citizens at the risk that their reaction might be at odds with the one expected of them (or imagined) by those who designed the project. A negative reception of a work of art is often less due to its content than to the nature of the space in which it is placed. The space, once ›public‹, encourages (and legitimises) the public audience to respond to it, whereas exhibition spaces such as galleries and museums themselves legitimise the work of art and thus create a more favourable reception straightaway (the audience has chosen to attend the exhibition, the work of art is inscribed in a context which endows it with meaning and so on).

Ironically, not all public works of art are rebuffed in the same way, and today a great deal is, in fact, accepted without difficulty within the urban environment. More and more artists are asked to participate in urban regeneration projects. European towns and capitals involved in creating artistic events in the public space are increasing in number. These events now channel the image of dynamic and attractive, artistic workshops and ephemeral artistic places; they shape the »new territories of art« (Kahn/Lextraire 2005), which grow at the city centre as much as at the outskirts, in France as much as in all of Europe, and which question and re-define the place of the artist in the city and in people's everyday life.

2. Urban Guerrillas

Urban guerrilla, wild affixing ... This second form of intervention connects directly with the urban space and explicitly questions the viewer without any institutional mediation. Daniel Buren has been one of the first to do that: since the 1960s, he has savagely displayed his work *in situ*, next to official exhibition pieces, thus reclaiming the public space in a spontaneous way.

The most popular manifestations – the most publicised as well – are those that take over the public space in an unruly manner, in order to provoke questioning from critical and engaged citizens.

One of the most emblematic artists is certainly ZEVS, whose visual attacks are regularly and swiftly destroyed. ZEVS became known in 2002, when he made an impression by exhibiting the image of the Lavazza coffee muse as a hostage. He cut out and removed the image of the mannequin (15m by 15m) in Alexanderplatz in Berlin with the message ›Visual kidnapping. Pay now!‹. He then showed the video of the kidnapping at the Rebel Minds Gallery in Berlin, where the cut up image is also to be seen. For several months, he played with the media by hiding and showing the visual hostage, and by threatening to execute it. Later, he cut a finger of the image, which was sent, enveloped in cotton, to the CEO of Lavazza to obtain a symbolic 500.000 € ransom, equivalent to the cost of the promotional campaign. ZEVS made it appear as if Lavazza accepted to pay the ransom by acting as his sponsor at the Palais de Tokyo (thus allowing him to exhibit his work there), and as if the payment of the ransom was due by April 1st.

The ›adbusters‹, as it were, recapture the public space which they think has been confiscated by the official advertising and by the circulation of its messages. In this way, any ordinary passerby could, if he or she so wished, »pick up« such a questioning and become an attentive »public« observer (Dewey 2006: 30), in the broadest possible way of understanding this term (beyond only a reference to the audience of the world of art). Whether as accomplices, partisans or opponents, these creations intend to restore the power and authority of the general public vis-à-vis the institutional ones.

It is the very nature of the public space which is at stake here (as seen above with artwork commissioned by the government): the citizen is in a position to make a statement, to contest an artistic project. In this way, the public space becomes creative material in itself, where the artwork integrates it rather than simply being exhibited there.

3. Artistic camouflage

The third form of art intervening in the public space is one of the most paradoxical ones, wherein the artists, whose artworks contrast almost all of the manifestations produced in the urban space, embrace the art of ›camouflage‹. These interventions are distinguished by their material characteristics: half live sculptures, half happenings, they are mostly only accessible to us through photography, even though one should really experience them *in situ* and *in visu*. The most playful forms are those presented by Urban Camouflage: In Germany, Sabina Keric

and Yvonne Bayer work in department stores and supermarkets hidden behind piles of plastic bottles, folding cardboards or bricolage material, where they are barely noticed. In doing so, they trick security guards and intrigue the customers. In a similar vein, in London, Aaron Larney conceals himself among urban graffiti, while Dina Elrayyes transforms herself, as it were, into a dustbin.

Désirée Palmen underlines the absence of private life in cities locked down by CCTVs. Following the installation of these cameras in Rotterdam in 1999, she embarks on a work that will make her known: she creates her first camouflage costume in order to escape the gaze of a huge screened CCTV in a post office. She once explained, not without humour, that she did not want to see herself on the screen every time she went to buy some stamps. From Rotterdam to the old city of Jerusalem, across her lifetime places and intimate spaces, Palmen identifies places under CCTV control in order to produce camouflage outfits that reproduce the features of these places. Thus camouflaged and supposedly disappearing in the urban environment, she places herself under the gaze of the cameras. By questioning both a world under surveillance and the disappearing of the individual behind uniformity, the »invisible characters« created by Palmen question the meaning of freedom and the place of the individual within a gaze-controlled society.

It is a way of blending in and of becoming one with the emerging landscape, one in which the artist »disappears« in order to be seen even better. By doing so, the artist delivers the full potential of the space and highlights what one hardly sees, not because it does not exist, but because one does not pay attention to it.

4. Public space and digital creation

Digital art seeps in and meddles with the public space too. Everyday technology (i.e. sensors, iPods, smartphones etc.) supports the work of artists, who thus inaugurate artistic practices unheard of. Olga Kisseleva's work is part of these innovative and original forms of art. Through visual illusions and deceptive images, her creations transform our gaze on urban and natural landscapes. Kisseleva »carries out experimentations, calculations and analyses by strictly respecting the scientific method of the domain involved«⁴. Here, there is yet another approach, another experience that the artist invites us to build in the public space, where real and virtual intertwine.

⁴ Olga Kisseleva, Sylvain Reynal, CrossWorld : de la théorie des codes correcteurs d'erreur à la manipulation politique, Plastik # 1 - Art & science, Janvier 2010 (<http://art-science.univ-paris1.fr/document.php?id=211>).

But the public space is also concerned by the new practices in the age of Web 2.0. Annie Chevretil-Desbiolles⁵ studies the changes brought by the usage of the Internet in the relationship between art and its public. This new context transforms in depth cultural processes and gives a new meaning and actuality to amateur practices. These transformations have touched the musical sphere as well as the domains of photography, video, writing, for example through the medium of smartphones. According to her, this movement should be exploited by public authorities to pursue their goals of an increased »cultural democracy«.

The web is more and more a ›public space‹ of transit, mixing and redistribution of these »cultures« by those who practice them. These digital users grab materials provided on the web to create new contents. Images and works are often produced and shared on the basis of this digital cultural supply. These daily practices correspond to a »collective individual reappropriation« of the mass culture of screens. By posting their comments, photos and videos on sharing sites, Internet practitioners are not anymore simply visitors but also promoters of contents that they produce themselves.

5. Conclusion

The public space serves two different purposes by moving away from its status of ›additional‹ exhibition space and by becoming central to the work of art itself. First, the artists mobilise it as an artistic context, whose specificity determines the audience's reception (the viewers' presence and participation, in different ways, are necessary). Secondly, it visibly and tangibly integrates and reserves ›a place‹ to art (State commissioned artworks, performances etc.) and then, in a more diffused way, it questions the established framework by mixing up the artists' and the audience's ›places‹.

The nature of the space thus acted upon transforms both the creative process and the forms of appropriation. Nevertheless, the above examples are still part of a conventional relationship towards art, wherein the classic rationale of the work of art, that is, ›creation, distribution and reception‹, is maintained. However, another more recent and collateral phenomenon has spread. The artists who initiated it are less preoccupied with having to create *in* and *for* the public space than with defining and creating a role in it (for themselves and their art). They have introduced new forms of intervention, which seemingly have a more social purpose than esthetical or artistic value. These forms of art use very ›ordinary means‹ and intend to appeal

⁵ Annie Chevretil-Desbiolles, »L'amateur dans le domaine des arts plastiques. Nouvelles pratiques à l'heure du web 2.0«, Département des publics et de la diffusion, Direction générale de la création artistique – Ministère de la culture et de la communication, France, Mars 2012 (<http://www.culturecommunication.gouv.fr/Disciplines-et-secteurs/Arts-plastiques/Documentation-arts-plastiques>).

to the ›common people‹. André Ducret reminds us that »since the 1920s, the artist has claimed the control over the place where the observer was summoned ›to watch‹ [...]. By availing himself of an independence recently conquered, the artist took decisions over his practice and method, both at the heart and at the borders of the artistic field« (Ducret 1992-93: 6-7), with an ascertained will of evading and distancing him or herself from the artistic institutions. It appears instead that now, an ›integrative‹ will is at play, one that gives way to original social experiences ›against‹ an artistic background.

Examples for these new forms of interventions are the flash mobs and *freezes*⁶ taking place in the public space. Notwithstanding their artistic dimension and esthetical intention, they are not considered as ›real‹ art, but still as ›more‹ than simple social interactions. One could also recall *La nuit blanche de l'art contemporain* in Paris, when the members of the public enthusiastically stroll around to view the contemporary artworks shown. Still one cannot conceive of such an experience as an artistic reception or as a cultural practice in a strong sense. The public space becomes a meeting place, or else, a place where people (not necessarily as an ›audience‹ in the proper sense) and objects (where the specific category of the artistic object disappears into that of the ›ephemeral, ornamental object‹) come closer in a relationship situated somewhere in between an artistic experience and an ›ordinary‹, common one. Hence the expression ›artistic background‹ mentioned above.⁷

These approaches, enacting an important detour from our main frames of experience – be that the relationship to the artistic object or to the public space –, have been little investigated, notwithstanding the fact that they are multiplying. When they are given attention, it is generally in a ›negative‹ way, in terms of their discrepancy and discordance from what one may expect of an esthetical experience ›as such‹, so that they are referred to as ›vulgarizations‹ or as social art, understood in a derogative sense.

Nonetheless, by taking a close look at this movement and at the process it underlies, one can note that it is far from letting itself be led astray. The majority of artists involved in these forms of intervention and of cultural agents promoting ›friendly‹ forms of mediation try to encourage, in the public space, a rather more ordinary way of coming together around the

⁶ Flash mob: »It concerns the gathering of a certain number of people who generally do not know each other, other than through the internet. This is a new form of social networking, a spontaneous and collective form of expression. More spectacular manifestations of this are the Freezes: in busy public spaces (i.e. stations, supermarkets etc.), flash mob participants fix in a position (freeze) for a few minutes as if they were statues« (see Chèvrefils-Desbiolles).

⁷ One must notice here that the balance and understanding of projects combining ›art and the social‹ differ from country to country: in France, when the artistic production has a social aim, it becomes the object of criticism, manipulations and vulgarizations. On the contrary, in Germany, the social dimension of the artistic object is valued and thus adds value to it. These are findings which have come out of a debate at the conference.

artistic creation. Thus, if this kind of art is ›social‹, it is so in a more pristine and simple meaning than the one that can be forced onto it. The public itself does not misunderstand its experience of such forms of interventions as what is usually labelled as ›cultural‹ practice. Away from all attempts at manipulation, the artists' aim is that of creating a different and non-discriminatory⁸ form of interaction, a more casual relationship to art, not necessarily falling within the logic of democratization. The interest is not that of gathering audiences otherwise kept apart, but that of interacting with the bystanders and of accommodating – without this being a drift, a pitfall or a problem – ›minor‹ arts such as leisure, entertainment and gathering (in all of its forms, including simply being there).

Now, if one had to consider the analytical models usually employed for the public, the artistic practice and its reception, many questions would arise:

- Since these works of art are produced according to other criteria than those structuring the world of art, their legitimacy and ›artfulness‹ can be debated: Is this still art? The issue is not so much to answer affirmatively or negatively but to define these forms of art appropriately in order to avoid unsuitable categorizations.
- The massive and/or enthusiastic presence of richly mixed audiences stimulates the political appropriation of these forms of intervention, which favours them as means of mediation in a democratizing perspective. Nevertheless, what does one democratise? It is worth not confusing here the sharing social venues, where artistic objects/events are accessible, with the aim of guaranteeing equal access to the world of art.
- The artists create an ambiguity: their intervention in the public space may correspond to an artistic decision but also to a choice by default.

Generally, sociological investigation is called to re-think and re-define new categorizations and systems of analysis which, even if they not always avoid cliché interpretations of art in the public space, at least provide the means to observe and understand their underpinnings. In this way, cultural relativism, which conceives of all practices as equivalent, could be obliterated. Moreover, one would also avoid the pitfall consisting in reducing the analysis to models that would not explain these practices or that might minimise or belittle them.

As audiences are unquestionably present in the public space, it is necessary to question how and what they experience. One way of going back to the question concerning the artistic experience, or else art as experience, is when the artists ›try and re-create a continuity between those refined and intense experiences that are the works of art, and the actions and

⁸ The world of art is by nature a hierarchical and potentially discriminatory space (Dewey 2010).

everyday events, which are universally recognised as constitutive elements of our experience« (Dewey 2006:30).

Interventions in the public space stem from a game attempting to push the boundaries of different spaces (artistic, private, collective and shared ones); a game through which the artists defy our different worlds by creating links and thus new worlds. As opposed to the artistic enterprise which understood the challenge of the public space as one which had to ›shock‹ through the ›extra-ordinary‹, we now face a trend aiming at privileging the ›ultra-ordinary‹. Probably it is by reviving the idea of a certain freedom (of reception rather than of production), and by putting the artist and the public on the same level in a shared public space, that Dewey's project can be fulfilled (Dewey 2006: 30):

»To my mind, the trouble with existing theories is that they start from a ready-made compartmentalization, or from a conception of art that ›spiritualizes‹ it out of connection with the objects of concrete experience. The alternative, however, to such spiritualization is not a degrading and Philistinish materialization of works of fine art, but a conception that discloses the way in which these works idealize qualities found in common experience. Were works of art placed in a directly human context in popular esteem, they would have a much wider appeal than they can have when pigeon-hole theories of art win general acceptance«.

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