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Public Art as Publicity

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The title of the symposium, for which this text was written, "In the Place of the Public Sphere," signals a double reading. In particular, the use of the word "place," or rather the place of the word "place," in the title asserts two different conceptions of the public sphere. In one reading the public sphere is a place, a kind of arena or location defined by spatial boundaries with an *inside* that can be occupied. Public sphere is a somewhere. A second reading of the title invokes a possible alternative to, or a replacement for, the public sphere. "In the place of" suggests that rather than an *inside*, we might imagine an *instead* to the public sphere.

The model of the public sphere that this last formulation implicitly critiques - a model against which to imagine an instead - is that of Jürgen Habermas's by-now classic work on the subject. Schematically put, in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962) [1] Habermas locates the emergence of the public sphere in the clubs, coffeehouses, debating societies, museums, newspapers, and other institutions of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe, where members of the rising bourgeois middle class gathered to discuss various matters of "public" interest. Concurrent with the rise of mass urban societies and the decline of monarchic absolutist rule, Habermas's bourgeois public sphere is conceived as a social and political form wherein the participating subjects, having bracketed out his personal interests and thus able

to engage in objective, disinterested debate, can collectively function as a kind of a watchdog overseeing the rule of the government or the authoritarian state. In this public sphere, a model of modern democratic processes, all subjects are presumed to be equal and equally able to participate in rational-critical debate without being prejudiced by self-interest.

In the past decade and more, Habermas's thesis on the bourgeois public sphere has received much criticism for its authorization of a patriarchal masculine subject as the normative subject of the public sphere; for its tendency to foreground idealized abstractions rather than existing political cultures; and for its lack of acknowledgement of the contributions of subcultural or counter publics (especially women) in the construction of the bourgeois public sphere. Contrary to the Habermasian model, more recent theories of the public sphere cast it as a site of varying types of competition and contestation, itself fraught with social fragmentation, of *unequal* and exclusive access, of what Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge describe as "competing communicative practices."

The impact and implication of such shifts in public sphere discourse for contemporary art are rather profound. To counteract the spatialization of the notion of the public sphere, art historian Frazer Ward, informed by the writings of Negt and Kluge that emphasize modes of communication (publicity) over the resulting site of communication (public sphere), has encouraged a shift in thinking about the function of art as a form of publicity.[2] Heeding such encouragement, this essay will review some paradigmatic public art works over the last thirty-five years in the United States to reconsider them as different forms of publicity, that is, as different models of communicative practices or forms of public address (rather than genres of art). This reconsideration will

be guided by the wisdom of Raymond Williams, who outlined in his 1961 essay "Communications and Community" four modes of communicative practices that follow a quasi-evolutionary development - from authoritarian, to paternalistic, to commercial, to the democratic.[3]

According to Williams, in an *authoritarian* system of communication a ruling group controls the society of the ruled, and all institutions of communication are in its control. It represses and excludes those ideas that threaten its authority. No individual or group is allowed to create its own communication system. It is a system in which there is only one way of seeing the world, with one set of rigid values, and these are imposed by a few over many. Williams characterizes this mode of communication as fundamentally "evil." The *paternalistic* mode of communication is "authoritarian with a conscience." Claiming to have a benevolent attitude of giving guidance, education, and improvement to the ruled, the ruling group regards its majority of subjects as if they are children who do not know what is best for them. The minority that is in power is driven by a sense of responsibility and duty to do good, to provide "public service," to the majority that is seen in some sense as backward and lacking. Interestingly, the underlying presumption is that the ruling group's superiority will eventually disappear when others "grow up" to be like the "adults." Williams notes that this mode is more exposed and vulnerable than the authoritarian system of communication but problematic nonetheless in terms of localization of power and control. The *commercial* mode of communication, initially proposed to oppose the first two modes, fundamentally challenges the rule of the few over the many. Fighting against state control (considered monopolistic whether authoritarian or paternalistic), the commercial mode relies on the free market as a basis for providing

the necessary freedom for all to publish and read what they choose. But while resisting state control, Williams writes, the commercial mode of communication instates *new* controls based on the criteria of profitability. As a result, power over information is still consolidated and shared among a small number of individuals or groups who control the majority of the newspapers, magazines, television, broadcasting (and we should add today the Internet). Finally, the decentralized *democratic* mode of communication, which is an ideal not yet fully realized for Williams, opposes both commercialism and state control. It is a system that maximizes individual participation and allows independent groups licensed to use publicly owned means of communication - theaters, broadcast stations, film studios, newspapers, etc. - to determine what is produced. 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.

These four categories of systems of communication or modes of publicity help to understand the ways in which public art practices in the United States have developed (or not developed) in the past four decades.[4] Moving chronologically, we can first consider Alexander Calder's *La Grande Vitesse* in Grand Rapids, Michigan, the premiere public sculpture sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts and its Art in Public Places Program in 1967. Viewed by many to be one of the most successful public art projects in the twentieth century, at least in North America, *La Grande Vitesse* is a biomorphic, modernist abstraction made out of steel and painted red. Located centrally within a large urban plaza surrounded by International-Style office buildings, the sculpture asserts its autonomy visually and physically, and it functions as a testimony to the singular "genius" of the artist. This kind of "plop

art," which appeared on many similar plazas throughout the major cities of the United States during the 1970s, was meant to be a "gift" of the government - local, state, or federal - to the public. With its panels and committees of select experts deciding the fate of public art commissions, with the purpose of bringing the "best" accomplishments in art to a general public, programs like the National Endowment for the Arts were established upon what Williams described as the paternalistic model of communication. The underlying presumption here is that the lives of the general public, thus far deprived of exposure to high culture, would benefit from the presence of great art in the spaces of everyday life, and that the government, with the aid of art experts, can function to provide such educational and elevating experiences to its people.

Similar presumptions continue to guide the NEA and other public art agencies throughout the seventies and eighties. The Wiesner Building on the MIT campus brought together Scott Burton, Kenneth Noland, and Richard Fleischer to collaborate with the architect I.M. Pei in providing art in the form of a public space. Foregrounding functionalism over aesthetics, such artist-architect team efforts integrated art into environmental design, with artists providing designs for seating, shading, lighting, etc., as part of a larger architectural or urban design project. While essentially remaining paternalistic in its mode of operation - that artists and architects, as well as the sponsoring government agency, know best what is good for the public - such efforts accommodated corporate interests keen on real estate development, too. Artists were recruited, in other words, to provide amenities that would increase the property value of certain buildings and zones of gentrification. As such, in this case, the paternalistic basis of public art is conflated with a commercial mode of public address.

Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* (1981-89) at Federal Plaza in downtown New York was meant to counter the art-as-public-spaces approach to public art that accommodated architecture or submitted to it. As an example of "critical" or "political" site specificity, the controversial sculpture showed up the hypocrisy of the "public" plaza as a cohesive and unified social space by negating the utilitarian or functionalist mandate for public art with an obtrusive and "useless" object.[5] But even as *Tilted Arc* challenged Federal Plaza's architectural condition as itself an authoritarian mode of communication (in Williams's terms), it nevertheless maintained a paternalistic attitude. During the hearings that ultimately led to the removal of the sculpture, the "art experts" defending the artistic merit and political value of artistic freedom, including the artist, voiced positions that clearly established their "superior" and refined knowledge over the uninformed and untrained impressions of the general public. Which is to say, the paternalistic mode of address of *Tilted Arc* is not too far removed from Calder's *La Grande Vitesse*, both as examples of a "high" achievement in art that is understood as such by a minority of few and presented to a majority social body presumed to lack in education and cultural refinement (but will transform through exposure).

In the 1990s, efforts to institute a more democratic mode of public art practice gained greater momentum (the publication of Suzanne Lacy's anthology *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* being one evidence of this trend[6]). Among numerous art works that can be pointed to along these lines is John Ahearn's Percent for Art project from 1992-93 that entailed the installation of three life-size cast statues of young residents of the South Bronx neighborhood where they were to be placed.[7] These figurative sculptures, considered more accessible to the public than the language of modernist abstraction (Calder) or post-minimalist art

(Serra), were, according to the artist, "heroic" representations of his neighbors. Since Ahearn himself lived in the South Bronx, and since the art was created in direct interaction, even collaboration, with the subjects, the "content" of these public sculptures were imagined to be identical to the "audience" for them. Instead of an art that is brought to the public as a gift from a paternalistic ruling group, Ahearn's effort was meant to function as art that is *of* the people, and to some extent *by* the people, that it represents. While the controversy arising from the presumptions of who can represent whom led to a quick removal of the sculptures (the artist chose to remove them), the debates concerning what constitutes a "democratic" mode of artistic address remain a potent lesson of Ahearn's South Bronx Sculpture Park project.

"New genre public art," as defined by Suzanne Lacy, seeks a "democratic" model of communication based on participation and collaboration of audience members in the production of a work of art. It simultaneously seeks social change, maintaining a certain instrumental attitude toward art as a means to facilitate policy changes or to correct social injustices. While such efforts challenge conventional power dynamics and hierarchies that sustain the contemporary art world, more often than not the democratic mode of communication that new genre public art envisions is for a unified public sphere. At the same time, it often maintains a certain paternalistic attitude toward the "collaborating" audience members.[8]

A better example of an effort to figure or model a democratic mode of communication in art is Group Material's *DaZiBao* poster project from 1983.[9] As an unsanctioned "guerilla act," it entailed the installation of a series of posters in Union Square, New York, that represented a range of different voices and opinions on a diverse set of political and social issues of the day - from U.S.

intervention in South America, to abortion rights, to the welfare system, etc. Using the ephemeral space of the city street and the ephemeral form of the street poster, Group Material presented to an unquantifiable audience - passersby - a picture of themselves as an un-unified public, comprised of disjunctive conversations and incommensurate points of view. Here, the "democratic" public sphere emerges as a competitive, formless, and inconclusive process.

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How satisfied are we with *this* model? As many have said before, the public sphere is always necessarily an ideal, an idealized construction (fantasy), insofar as it imagines a possibility and potential of overcoming social differences to debate issues of common concern.[10] In the past, this notion of the "common" was heard as a universalizing tendency asserted by the dominant ideological regime that obscures not only minority or marginalized constituencies but maintains and naturalizes the power structure of this regime. But, as Frazer Ward has written, "Given on the one hand the contemporary dominance of mass media, and on the other, the balkanization of identity politics and its tendency to degenerate into a field of clashing particularized claims...a necessarily modified Habermasian scheme demands attention." Which is to say, in the face of balkanized identity politics (greater and greater individualization and division based on a sense of absolute, incommensurate, and non-relational difference, self-authorization based on psychological, political, and/or social offense or trauma) and the homogenizing affects (erasure of difference, or "depth," a la Fredric Jameson) wrought by the intensities of late capitalism's mass mediated spectacle culture - both leading to either non-communicative impasses (leading to violence) or numbing of the senses to utter incapacity - it might be useful not

to throw out Habermas's vision of the bourgeois public sphere so readily. The fantasy of a public sphere, where one might bracket, temporarily, one's private, personal interests to imagine a collective identification, a different sort of intimacy - not for affirmation, consensus, or unification (not a self-same identification) - seems more important than ever. Such an effort to imagine a democratic public sphere anew is necessarily an exercise in abstraction, and the (art) work to be done seems to be located in the space of coming together of this different sort of intimacy and publicity.

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[1] Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962), trans. Thomas Burger with Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1989).

[2] See Frazer Ward, "The Haunted Museum: Institutional Critique and Publicity," in *October* 73 (Summer 1995): 71-89.

[3] Raymond Williams, "Communications and Community" (1961), in Robin Gable, ed., *Resources of Hope* (London: Verso, 1989), 19-31.

[4] The analysis that follows draws on arguments posed in my book *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002).

[5] Among a big range of writings on the *Tilted Arc* controversy, see Clara Weyergraf-Serra and Martha Buskirk, eds., *The Destruction of Tilted Arc: Documents* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), Rosalyn Deutsche, "*Tilted Arc* and the Uses of Public Space,"

Design Book Review 23 (Winter 1992): 22-27, and Douglas Crimp, "Redefining Site Specificity," in *On the Museum's Ruins*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 150-198.

[6] Suzanne Lacy, ed., *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995).

[7] For more information on this project, see Jane Kramer, *Whose Art Is It?* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994), and my book, *One Place after Another*.

[8] See my critique of new genre public art in *One Place after Another*.

[9] For more information on this project and Group Material, see Nina Felshin, ed., *But Is It Art?: The Spirit of Art as Activism* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995).

[10] See, for instance, Bruce Robbins, ed., *The Phantom Public Sphere* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).