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Public Art and Urban Identities

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[This essay was originally published with the title "For Hamburg: Public Art and Urban Identities" in the exhibition catalogue Public Art is Everywhere (Hamburg, Germany: Kunstverein Hamburg and Kulturbehörde Hamburg, 1997, 95-109), organized by artist Christian Philipp Muller. Although my critique here of the conditions of public art and their relationship to urban reorganization seems outdated, reductive, and too strident now, I hope the text will nonetheless add to a richer understanding of the contradictory pressures that impact public art programs today. Miwon Kwon, 08/2002]

Public art practices within the United States have experienced significant shifts over the past thirty years. [1]

The three paradigms can be schematically distinguished:
(1) *art in public places*, typically a modernist abstract sculpture placed outdoors to "decorate" or "enrich" urban spaces, especially plaza areas fronting federal buildings or corporate office towers;
(2) *art as public spaces*, less object-oriented and more site-conscious art that sought greater integration between art, architecture, and the landscape through artists' collaboration with members of the urban managerial class (such as architects, landscape architects, city planners, urban designers, and city administrators), in the designing of permanent urban (re)development projects such as parks, plazas, buildings, promenades, neighborhoods, etc.; and more recently,
(3) *art in the public interest* (or "new genre public art"), often temporary city-based programs focusing on social issues rather than the built environment that involve collaborations with marginalized social groups (rather than design professionals), such as the homeless, battered women, urban youths, AIDS patients, prisoners, and which strives toward the development of politically-conscious community events or programs.

These three paradigms of public art reflect broader shifts in advanced art practices over the past thirty years: the slide of emphasis from aesthetic concerns to social issues, from the conception of an art work primarily as an object to ephemeral processes or events, from prevalence of permanent installations to temporary interventions, from the primacy of production as source of meaning to reception as site of interpretation, and from autonomy of authorship to its multiplicitous expansion in participatory collaborations. While these shifts represent a greater inclusivity and democratization of art for many artists, arts administrators, arts institutions, and some of their audience members, there is also the danger of a premature and uncritical embrace of "progressive" art as an equivalent of "progressive" politics. (Although neglected by the mainstream art world, artistic practices based in community organizing and political activism has been around for a long time. Why is it now that it has become a favored model in public arts programming and arts funding?) The shifts in artistic practice, while challenging the ideological establishment of art, may at the same time capitulate to the changing modes of capitalist expansion. What appears to be progressive, even transgressive and radical, may in fact serve conservative if not reactionary agendas of the dominant minority.

As a follow-up, I want to address more specifically here the relationship between art practices and the production of urban identities. Throughout its recent history, public art has been defined in part against a (discursive) backdrop of "spectre of placelessness" and the "death of cities." Initially described in architectural terms in the 1960s and 70s, the ostensive demise of urban centers and the degradation of "quality of life"

therein are described more and more now in terms of social problems such as violence, homelessness, poverty, crime, drugs, pollution, etc. But whether concerned with the character of the built environment or with the uneven socio-economic relations foundational to current urban conditions, "place-making" remains a central, if unarticulated, imperative in public arts programming today. Public art participates in the production of a site's distinction, often a city's uniqueness, which in turn is intimately engaged in the processes of economic reorganization of resources and power as they are played out through the rehierarchization of space in the social structure of cities.

I present two seemingly antithetical case studies here to address the art-city relationship. First is Alexander Calder's 1969 sculpture La Grande Vitesse in Grand Rapids, Michigan, the first public art work sponsored by the Art-in-Public-Places Program of the National Endowment for the Arts' Visual Arts Program, which was established in 1965. Conceived as a capping for an urban development program, Grand Rapids, like so many other American cities in the late 1960s and 70s, wanted to build a thriving new downtown business and cultural center. The cultural leaders of the city wanted to "get on the map" both nationally and internationally, which is to say, they conceived the city to be siteless. The city solicited Calder, an artist of international renown, indeed one of the fathers of modernist abstraction, for a work that could be hailed as a "Grand Rapids Calder," like the "Chicago Picasso," which had been commissioned with private funds for the Chicago Civic Center and installed two years earlier in 1967.

Despite the initial controversy regarding La Grande Vitesse over issues of regionalism vs. nationalism, the usefulness of an abstract sculpture vs. a properly large fountain, and questions about Calder's allegiance to America (he had lived in France for most of his adult life), La Grande Vitesse in subsequent years has apparently been embraced by the city. Outdoing the Picasso sculpture in its emblematic function, the sculpture has been incorporated into the city's official stationery and its image is even stenciled onto the city's garbage trucks. To the extent that a work of art has become a symbol of the city, La Grande Vitesse, as the first public sculpture to be installed under the auspices of the NEA, is still considered to be one of the most successful public art projects in the United States.

Considering the site as a physical entity, Calder's large red sculpture was to become a centralizing focal point, a powerful presence that would visually and spatially organize the space of the plaza, which was modeled somewhat superficially on European piazzas. In addition to providing a "humane" reprieve from the surrounding modern glass-steel office architecture, deemed brutal and inhumane, the sculpture was to function as a marker of identity for the plaza. At the same time, La Grande Vitesse was to create an identity for the city at large. On the one hand, the city thought itself to be lacking in distinctive identity, without unique features, a city whose site was unspecific. With an itinerant inferiority complex economically and culturally, Grand Rapids wanted to find a place for itself "on the map." On the other hand, Calder had established himself as a pedigree artist of strong identity and signature style. The function of La Grande Vitesse was to infuse the sense of placelessness of the plaza with the artist's creative originality, to literally mark the plaza site as a singular, "specific" location. By extension, the sculpture was to mark the uniqueness of the city as a whole.

It is important to note that Calder never saw, nor did he feel it necessary to visit, the plaza before the sculpture's installation. Like a good modernist, he operated under the assumptions of an art work's autonomy. The site, in the case of this project, then, was conceived as a kind of abstract blankness awaiting some marker (i.e., art, sculpture) to give it what could be claimed an authentic identity, even if that identity was created through the logic of a logo. The insertion of an art work functioned like an inscription, giving the site a voice. Calder's "voice" as an artist was joined together with Grand Rapids' perceived lack of one, as La Grande Vitesse gathered up what surrounds it (the plaza and the city), to become an emblem for the city, rendering

the city into a sign. In a strange sense, even though the sculpture was not conceived as site specific, it nevertheless became site specific--site specificity was *produced* here as an *effect* and not engaged as a method of artistic production.

Unlike the Calder example, the second case begins with the general cultural valorization of places as the locus of authentic experience and coherent sense of historical and personal identity. Relying on a certain gymnastics of logic in relation to the site, qualities like originality, authenticity, and singularity are reworked in recent site-oriented practices--evacuated from the artwork and attributed to the site. "Places with a Past," the 1991 site-specific city-based arts programs organized by independent curator Mary Jane Jacob, although not conceived as a public art project per se, serves as an instructive example in this context. The exhibition, composed of nineteen site-specific installations by internationally well-known artists, took the city of Charleston, South Carolina, as not only the backdrop but a "bridge between the works of art and the audience." [2]. In addition to breaking the rules of the art establishment (taking art to the "street" and to the "people"), "Places with a Past" wanted to further a dialogue between art and the socio-historical dimension of places. According to Jacob, "Charleston proved to be fertile ground" for the investigation of issues concerning

"...gender, race, cultural identity, considerations of difference... subjects much in the vanguard of criticism and art-making...
The actuality of the situation, the fabric of the time and place of Charleston, offered an incredibly rich and meaningful context for the making and siting of publicly visible and physically prominent installations that rang true in [the artists'] approach to these ideas." [3]

While site-specific art continues to be described as a refutation of originality and authenticity as intrinsic qualities of the art object or the artist, this resistance facilitates the translation and relocation of these qualities from the art work to the place of its presentation. But then, these qualities *return* to the art work now that it has become integral to the site. Admittedly, according to Jacob, "locations...contribute a specific identity to the shows staged by injecting into the experience the uniqueness of the place." [4] Conversely, if the social, historical, and geographical specificity of Charleston offered artists a unique opportunity to create unrepeatable works (and by extension an unrepeatable exhibition), then exhibitions like "Places with a Past" ultimately utilize art to *promote* Charleston as a unique place also. What is prized most of all in site-specific (public) art is still the singularity and authenticity that the presence of the artist seems to guarantee, not only in terms of the presumed unrepeatability of the work but in the ways in which the presence of the artist also endows places with a "unique" distinction.

As I have written elsewhere [5], site-specific art can lead to the unearthing of repressed histories, provide support for greater visibility of marginalized groups and issues, and initiate the re(dis)covery of "minor" places so far ignored by the dominant culture. But inasmuch as the current socio-economic order thrives on the (artificial) production and (mass) consumption of difference (for difference sake), the siting of art in "real" places can also be a means to *extract* the social and historical dimensions out of places to variously serve the thematic drive of an artist, satisfy institutional demographic profiles, or fulfill the fiscal needs of a city.

Significantly, the appropriation of site-specific public art for the valorization of urban identities comes at a time of a fundamental cultural shift in which architecture and urban planning, formerly the primary media for expressing a vision of the city, are displaced by other media more intimate with marketing and advertising. In the words of urban theorist Kevin Robins, "As cities have become ever more equivalent and urban identities increasingly 'thin,'...it has become necessary to employ advertising and marketing agencies to manufacture such distinctions. It is a question of distinction in a world beyond difference." [6] Site specificity and public art in this context find new importance because they can supply distinction of place and uniqueness of locational identity, highly seductive qualities in the promotion of towns and cities within the competitive

restructuring of the global economic hierarchy. Thus, site-specific public art remains inexorably tied to a process that renders particularity and identity of various cities a matter of product differentiation. Indeed, the exhibition catalogue for "Places with a Past" was a tasteful tourist promotion, pitching the city of Charleston as a unique, "artistic," and meaningful place (to visit). [7] Under the pretext of their articulation or resuscitation, site-specific public art can be mobilized to expedite the erasure of differences via the commodification and serialization of places.

It is within this framework, in which art is put to the service of generating a sense of authenticity and uniqueness of place for quasi-promotional agendas, that I understand the goals of city-based art programs in Europe as well, such as "Sculpture. Projects in Münster 1997." (It should be noted that the 1987 Sculpture Project in Münster served as one of the models for "Places with a Past.") According to co-curator Klaus Bußmann's press release,

"The fundamental idea behind the exhibitions was to create a dialogue between artists, the town and the public, in other words, to encourage the artists to create projects that dealt with conditions in the town, its architecture, urban planning, its history and the social structure of society in the town. [....] Invitations to artists from all over the world to come to Münster for the sculpture project, to enter into a debate with the town, have established a tradition which will not only be continued in the year 1997 but beyond this will become something specific to Münster: a town not only as an "open-air museum for modern art" but also as a place for a natural confrontation between history and contemporary art. [....] The aim of the exhibition "Sculpture. Projects in Münster" is to make the town of Münster comprehensible as a complex, historically formed structure exactly in those places that make it stand out from other towns and cities." [8]

Which is to say, the ambitions of programs like "Places with a Past" and "Sculpture. Projects in Münster 1997" ultimately do not seem to veer very far from those of the city officials and cultural leaders of Grand Rapids, Michigan, thirty years ago. For despite the tremendous differences in the art of choice among these three events, their investment in generating a sense of uniqueness and authenticity for their respective places of presentation remains quite consistent. As such endeavors to engage art in the nurturing of specificities of locational difference gather momentum, there is a greater and greater urgency in distinguishing between the *cultivation* of art and places and their *appropriation* for the promotion of cities as cultural commodities.

[1] See my "Im Interesse der Öffentlichkeit...," in *Springer* (December 1996-February 1997): 30-35.

[2] See *Places with a Past: New Site-Specific Art at Charleston's Spoleto Festival*, ex. cat. (New York: Rizzoli, 1991), 19. The exhibition took place May 24-August 4, 1991, with nineteen "site-specific" works by artists including Ann Hamilton, Christian Boltanski, Cindy Sherman, David Hammons, Lorna Simpson and Alva Rogers, Kate Ericson and Mel Ziegler, and Ronald Jones, among others. The promotional materials, especially the exhibition catalogue, emphasized the innovative challenge of the exhibition format over the individual projects, and foregrounded the authorial role of Mary Jane Jacob over the artists.

[3] Ibid., 17.

[4] Ibid., 15.

[5] My comments here are from a longer essay on this topic. See my "One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity," *October* 80 (Spring 1997).

[6] Kevin Robins, "Prisoners of the City: Whatever Can a Postmodern City Be?," in Erica Carter, James Donald, and Judith Squires, eds., *Space and Place: Theories of Identity and Location* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1993), 306.

[7] Cultural critic Sharon Zukin has noted, "it seemed to be official policy [by the 1990s] that making a place for art in the city went along with establishing a marketable identity for the city as a whole." See Sharon Zukin, *The Culture of Cities* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 23.

[8] Klaus Bußmann, undated press release for "Sculpture. Projects in Münster 1997," n.p.