CRITICAL ISSUES IN PUBLIC ART

CONTENT, CONTEXT, AND CONTROVERSY

Chapter 22- Temporality and Public Art

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Temporality and Public Art

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Life is never fixed and stable. It is always mercurial,
rolling and splitting, disappearing and reemerging
in a most unpredictable fashion.

—*Loren Eiseley*[1]

Immutability is valued by society. There is a desire for a steadfast art that expresses permanence through its own perpetualness. Simultaneously, society has a conflicting predilection for an art that is contemporary and timely, that responds to and reflects its temporal and circumstantial context. And then there is a self-contradicting longing that this fresh spontaneity be protected, made invulnerable to time, in order to assume its place as historical artifact and as concrete evidence of a period's passions and priorities. For the Venice Biennale in 1986, Krzysztof Wodiczko projected a collaged photographic image of a 35-mm camera, a gun belt with a grenade, and a large tank for several hours onto the base of the 600-year-old campanile in the Piazza San Marco. Besides providing a critique of tourism and politics, Wodiczko's project offered a potent dialectic on the ambivalent requirements for stability and preservation, and change and temporality. To make these points, it required both the unyielding permanence of the campanile and the ephemerality of projected light. Public art is about such dynamic issues; public life embodies such contradictions.

The late twentieth century has thrown these questions of time and expectation, change and value into high relief. It is an accelerated, acquisitive, and acquiescent age in which the presence of enduring objects has become as quixotic as time itself. What is substantial—what is coveted and depended on with some certainty, what endures across generations—is often no longer expressed or communicated by the same symbols. The visual environment transposes as rapidly as the actions of the mind and the eye. In both private and public life the phenomenological dimensions of indeterminacy, change, and the temporary require aggressive assimilation, not

because they are grim, unavoidable forces but because they suggest potential ideas and freedoms.

Coming to grips with the temporary does not require a fast, desperate embrace of absolute relativity; both strong lessons and substantial ideas can be discovered in the synapses, the alternatives that occur between, and conceptually connect, discrete phenomena. The reality of ephemerality is perhaps most persuasively and unmistakably felt in the vast public landscape. The private can offer some quiet refuge, some constancy of routine, but public life has become emblematic not of what is shared by a constituency but of the restless, shifting differences that compose and enrich it. Public life is both startlingly predictable and constantly surprising.

As Richard Sennett and others have suggested,[2] the private is a human condition, but the public is invented—and re-created by each generation. In retrospect, there has been a discernible public life in most societies throughout time, but the idea of public is mutable and flexible. The notion of public may, indeed, be the most quixotic idea encountered in contemporary culture. It is redefined not just by the conspicuous adjustments of political transition and civic thought but by the conceptions of private that serve as its foil, its complement, and, ultimately, its texture. The challenge for each person is to uphold this dynamic interplay of personal and public identity, to embrace the often stimulating and always difficult nature of this important dialogue, and to be as fully engaged in the world as with one's own psychic territory.

These developmental ideas about the public frequently run parallel to the current enthusiasms for public art that have overrun most cities and towns in the United States. It is as if the literature and legacy of the public process and the interest in public art production were separate entities, spontaneous eruptions uninformed by, and perhaps unaware of, the other. Discussions of public art frequently consider specific communities but rarely the public at large. There seems to be an implicit assumption that everybody knows what "public" means, and concerns turn to more observable, more easily calculable issues. Much has been said about the failures or successes of public art, but very little about the philosophical questions a public art may raise or illuminate, or even about whether the idea of a public art requires significant intellectual inquiry and justification in the first place. I think that the problem is that public art has sought to define itself without assembling all of the data and before entertaining all of the complex and potent variables it must accept and can express. Public art has been too often applied as a modest antidote or a grand solution, rather than perceived as a forum for investigation, articulation, and constructive reappraisal. Al-

though it is at an exploratory stage, public art is treated as if it were a production of fixed strategies and principles.

One way that artists and agencies can continue to generate public art and remain analytical about its purpose, its composition, and how it is to be distinguished (or not) from other creative enterprises is to support more short-lived experiments in which variables can be changed and results intelligently and sensitively examined. Public art requires a more passionate commitment to the temporary—to the information culled from the short-lived project. This proposal is offered not as an indictment of or indifference to permanent public art, but rather as an endorsement of alternatives. The temporary not only has a certain philosophical currency, but it permits art production to simulate the idea of the research laboratory. This proposal is conservative: a suggestion to take time, to study, to try more modest projects, to express what is known about the contemporary condition. It requires a comprehension of value based on ideas and content rather than on lasting forms, a flexibility of procedures for making and placing art, and a more inventive and attentive critical process.

In his book on geological time, *Time's Arrow, Time's Cycle,*[3] Stephen Jay Gould explores the dual nature of time in Western thought: temporality is experienced both cyclically and consecutively. The Western mind relies on conceptions of time that explain both the security of constancy and continuity and the stimulation of progress and change. The public is shaped by similar coincidental and contradictory ideas. People return cyclically to annual public events even when these seem empty and reflexive; they provide a fixed point of reference. But public life must also accommodate the actions of progress; on this depends the enhancement of democratic values and the enrichment of life. Linearity enables the public to rally its strength and vision to work for improvement and revision. These opposing conceptions of temporality are intrinsically connected to public life—to expectations that guide actions, to the events and occurrences that constantly define and transform experience. And these potent, problematic ideas are what art has traditionally addressed through its formal and temporal manifestations. Public art is like other art, but it is potentially enriched and amended by a multiplicity of philosophical, political, and civic issues. It need not seek some common denominator or express some common good to be public, but it can provide a visual language to express and explore the dynamic, temporal conditions of the collective.

Clearly, public art is not public just because it is out of doors, or in some identifiable civic space, or because it is something that almost everyone

can apprehend; it is public because it is a manifestation of art activities and strategies that take the idea of public as the genesis and subject for analysis. It is public because of the kinds of questions it chooses to ask or address, and not because of its accessibility or volume of viewers. This is, of course, a far more difficult and obscure definition of public art, and the methods and intentions of production and criticism are less predictable, more unruly. It requires a commitment to experimentation—to the belief that public art and public life are not fixed. There are many variables; time is perhaps the most crucial and the least frequently addressed.

If the "public" in public art is construed not as the audience for the art but as the body of ideas and subjects that artists choose to concentrate on, then public art cannot be examined for its broadness of communication, for its popular reception, for its sensitive siting. A temporal public art may not offer broad proclamations; it may stir controversy and rage; it may cause confusion; it may occur in nontraditional, marginal, and private places. In such an art the conceptual takes precedence over the more obvious circumstantial.

Public art is about the idea of the commons—the physical configuration and mental landscape of American public life. The commons was frequently a planned but sometimes a spontaneously arranged open space in American towns, but its lasting significance in cultural history is not so much the place it once held in the morphology of the city as the idea it became for the enactment and refreshment of public life—its dynamic, often conflicting expressions. If the actual site of the commons confirmed some constancy for people, the moment of the day and the time of the year defined the activities and priorities realized in the space. At times of conflict and war, the commons was used to train and drill militia; in the spring and summer, the open green space was used as another meadow for livestock to graze; at times of political election or civic debate it became the site for speech making, for the debate of issues, as the space of dissent. The commons was the stage where the predictable and unexpected theater of the public could be presented and interpreted. It was the physical and psychic location where change was made manifest. The kind of agitation, drama, and unraveling of time that defines "public" occurred most vividly and volatilely in the commons. It was not the site of repose or rigidity.

Those responsible for the sponsorship and production of contemporary public art would do well to follow the actual life of the commons and its harmonious, mythical misrepresentation. The space of the commons existed to support the collage of private interests that constitutes all commu-

nities, to articulate and not diminish the dialectic between common purpose and individual free wills. It is in that space that the idea of time and its relationship to the public may be best understood. The philosophical idea of the commons is based on dissent, transition, and difficult but committed resolution; this legacy remains current even as the space and memory of the commons are diminished.

In New York City, there are two organizations whose primary mission is to support and encourage the production of temporary, ephemeral public art. The irony of sustained institutional support for the most fleeting endeavors is obvious, but the aesthetic results are frequently informed by the exceptional situation. Their variety of productions has actually challenged the institutionalization of public art; whether all the work they have sponsored is good, or maverick, or communicative is not the issue. It is the field of experimentation that they have tried to cultivate that is remarkable. They take the idea of the commons to many different communities; the exercise of displacement has reinforced and provided fresh articulations of the commons as the symbol, if not the site, of public life. In contrast to these organizations, there are also artists who work independently to produce public art that is often unexpected, infrequently encountered, and deliberately short-lived. It is through many of these productions that the idea of a public art is acquiring a tougher accountability and identity.

In the early 1970s, Creative Time, Inc., began to organize its first public art productions. The organization began by using conventional sites offered by corporations with excess, underutilized real estate. The first site of a Creative Time production was Wall Street Plaza at 88 Pine Street. The 6,000-square-foot lobby was provided by Orient Overseas Associates. Between 1974 and 1978, four experimental works were installed in this vast space.[4] The one that was most participatory and perhaps most enthusiastically received was Red Grooms's *Ruckus Manhattan*. Grooms and a large number of assistants worked for more than seven months inventing and constructing a rich allegorical, visual narrative of Manhattan. The stories of pedestrians who visited the site were frequently adopted and transformed in Grooms's rowdy, accretive project.

Creative Time's most enduring and repeated project—*Art on the Beach*—was an annual event begun in the summer of 1978. On a two-acre landfill site at the north end of the Battery Park City development, the organization sponsored collaborative public-art projects involving artists, architects, dancers, choreographers, musicians, and other creative professionals. The projects were constructed at the beginning of the summer,

performances were scheduled during the season, and the entire extravaganza disappeared by autumn. In 1987, when *Art on the Beach* lost its sandy expanse in Manhattan, Creative Time transported the summer event to another, more gritty, landfill site at Hunters Point in Queens, which was provided by the Port Authority.

What is perhaps most significant and resonant about *Art on the Beach* and so many other Creative Time–sponsored public art activities is their temporality and the opportunity (and necessity) they provided for artists to be experimental. Every year, the structure of *Art on the Beach* changed: new variables were introduced, others were eliminated. It thus became a continuing laboratory for examining the relationship of collaborative process to aesthetic production in temporary work. In some years, Creative Time assembled the collaborative teams; in others, the artists themselves selected their colleagues. But it was the annual anticipation as well as the short-lived dynamics of each *Art on the Beach* that enabled and endorsed this kind of productive fiddling and fine-tuning. Perhaps a careful analysis of each *Art on the Beach* would reveal much about the nature of collaboration and about the intense compression of ideas that occurs in a temporary urban site in a squeezed period of time.

Although its sponsored productions are quite different from those of Creative Time, the Public Art Fund, Inc., founded in 1972, is dedicated to the temporary placement of public art in a variety of urban neighborhoods and contexts. The sites are commonly accepted public sites—parks and plazas—but the Public Art Fund projects come and go; the art becomes the dynamic variable in a series of sometimes predictable, sometimes unusual urban settings. One of the organization's most inventive sponsorships is the *Messages to the Public* series. Begun in 1982, this project makes the Spectacolor computer-animated lightboard on the north elevation of the building at One Times Square available to artists to program short (usually twenty seconds) spots that run about once every twenty minutes. Inserted between tacky and aggressive advertisements, these Public Art Fund "moments" not only provide a surprising, direct forum for public art but also raise questions about the relationship of public art to information and stimulate wry speculations about art and advertising. Some of the Spectacolor works project a deliberate ambiguity between the art moment and the ad, between the aesthetic-political agenda and the pitch to the consumer.

The Spectacolor projects programmed by artists are temporary and episodic; the medium demands ephemerality. The presentation of new information must be relentless; the balance of change and repetition must be carefully considered. Also, the encounter and experience of the audience

are unregulated; there are some public art enthusiasts who seek out this changing series of messages, but the majority of viewers are unprepared and arrive often by chance on site; *Messages to the Public* is often delivered to a public that is unfamiliar with the Public Art Fund, with the participating artists, or with this strange convergence of art images and advertisements. It is this unregulated encounter of the art and the ambiguity of its structure and content that make this series a rich, complex, and not adequately analyzed forum.

The landscape of public art in New York City would be greatly diminished without the kind of ephemeral theater and important data produced by the two organizations. But what is important about both Creative Time, Inc., and the Public Art Fund, Inc., is not simply the variety of art productions that they have brought to the streets and spaces of the city, but the forum they have provided to explore the meaning of public art in the late twentieth century. Because the work is part of the urban fabric for short periods of time, there is freedom to try new ideas, new forms, new methods of production. Perhaps there is also the willingness to engage difficult ideas and current issues in ways that more enduring projects cannot. The highly compressed and temporal circumstances are an incitement—and also a responsibility—to be courageous with ideas, to be vanguard about definitions of public art, and to make commitments that concern content rather than longevity.

Some of the most fruitful, provocative, temporary installations of public art have come from artists on their own initiative both with and without the support or restraints of official sponsors. Tom Finkelpearl has done short-lived public art projects with both Creative Time and the Public Art Fund, but some of his strongest public work has been independently produced. Several years ago, he moved to New York to study a common and growing phenomenon of abandonment in the city. Finkelpearl began his own guerrilla project to explore and perhaps heighten some collective awareness of the attitude of obsolescence. At different sites, he finds old abandoned cars and painstakingly paints these rusted carcasses gold, endowing them with an artificial, ironic, sprayed-on patina of preciousness. These projects happen spontaneously; they last until the cars are finally towed away. It is as if the act of public art, the commitment to communication, the gesture of compassion and critique transcend the lasting qualities of the object. That these golden wrecks disappear often quickly and always unpredictably amplifies their disturbing, ambivalent iconography.

Several years ago Alfredo Jaar arranged with the Metropolitan Transit

Alfredo Jaar, *Rushes,* 1986, Spring Street Subway Station, New York, NY.
(Photo: Alfredo Jaar)

Authority and the lease-holders of the advertising space on the Spring Street subway platform in New York to insert his own installation. For just over a month, Jaar's pasted-on posters—images of a gold rush occurring in Brazil amid abject poverty—replaced the usual advertisements meant to induce people to part with their money. Along the length of the uptown and downtown platforms, Jaar placed large prints of photographs he had taken of this modern-day phenomenon; throughout the installation period, he regularly inserted posters with the current world gold prices in New York, Frankfurt, Tokyo, and London. On this subway line to Wall Street, passengers encountered these grim, grainy images of men who dig for gold with little hope of finding any for themselves. The artist offered no explanatory or didactic text; the public was asked to form its own perceptions and draw its own conclusions. But the success of this political production was the sense of urgency and dislocation embodied in the temporary. In this context, created to sell magazines, liquor, and underwear to waiting passengers, Jaar used the frames and format for advertising to engage the public in a complex and disturbing narrative about its own complicity in world events. His project asked people to overcome their insularity and isolation. The content was underscored by the immediacy and brevity of the installation. The fact that it appeared almost spontaneously and disappeared quickly helped to accentuate the urgency of the ideas.

There is a danger in a public art that is not challenged, that is based on naïvely constructed prescriptions. Some of the restraining assumptions made about public art concern where it should occur, who the audience is, what issues it can address, what ideas it can express, and how long it should last; much of this speculation is based on information and impressions formed more than a century ago. The historical precedents for public art offer no template for the present or for the future. Public art does not have to last forever; it does not have to cast its message to some unmistakable but platitudinous theme that absolutely everyone will get; it does not have to mark or make a common ground. As the texture and context of public life change over the years, public art must reach for new articulations and new expectations. It must rely on its flexibility, its adaptability to be both responsive and timely, to be both specific and temporary. Ephemeral public art provides a continuity for analysis of the conditions and changing configurations of public life, without mandating the stasis required to express eternal values to a broad audience with different backgrounds and often different verbal and visual imaginations.

The errors of much public art have been its lack of specificity, its

tendency to look at society—at the public—too broadly and simply. The temporary in public art is not about an absence of commitment or involvement, but about an intensification and enrichment of the conception of public. The public is diverse, variable, volatile, controversial; and it has its origins in the private lives of all citizens. The encounter of public art is ultimately a private experience; perception outlasts actual experience. It is these rich ambiguities that should provide the subject matter for public art; the temporary provides the flexible, adjustable, and critical vehicle to explore the relationship of lasting values and current events, to enact the idea of the commons in our own lives. A conceptualization of the idea of time in public art is a prerequisite for a public life that enables inspired change.

Notes

1. Loren Eiseley, *Man, Time, and Prophecy,* New York, 1966, p. 27.
2. Richard Sennett, *The Uses of Disorder,* New York, 1970.
3. Stephen Jay Gould, *Time's Arrow, Time's Cycle,* Cambridge, MA, 1987.
4. Anita Contini, "Alternative Sites and Uncommon Collaborators: The Story of Creative Time," *Insights/On Sites,* ed., Stacy Paleologos Harris, Washington, DC, 1984.