

On public art as communication act

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One of the central issues of the contemporary social and cultural geography is the differentiation between *place* and *space*,¹ whereby *space* is related to physical objects and prescribed meanings, planning and production, while *place* refers to interpretation, use and psychogeography.² The relationship between those two planes can be illustrated with an argument by French post-structuralist Michel de Certeau: ‘Place is a practiced space. . . . in relation to space, place is like the word when it is spoken.’³ Speaking of public space, we are therefore speaking of a communication environment where information is constantly sent and received. Such space should not be viewed as a territory divided evenly (for example, into square kilometres), but as an unevenly-spread semiosphere, determined not by the physical parameters of space but by the intensity of its use. As successful communication is predicated on the existence of an ordered sign system and grammar, then for instance, an urban space is much larger (more eloquent) as a *place* than a wilderness with a territory tens of times more extensive.

Urban space is densely signified, segmented and categorised through functions, names etc.⁴ As meaning is at the centre of the experience of place and the city⁵, the objects making up a sign system — significant buildings, institutions, monuments, traffic signs, etc. — have to be universally understandable, supplied with explanatory and indicative texts where necessary. On a higher level, urban space is organised by rules and

1 About difficulties in differentiating between the concepts of *place* and *space*, see Anti Randviir, *Ruumisemiootika: tähendusliku maailma kaardistamine* [Semiotics of Space: Mapping the Meaningful World], (University of Tartu Press, 2010), p. 19.

2 Somewhat more problematic in this context are the French (original) terms *espace* and *lieu*: for example, Michel de Certeau uses them oppositely to what is indicated here; likewise, as regards the texts by Henri Lefebvre, culture and communication theorist Tim Unwin has pointed out shifts in meaning which occur in translation from French into English.

3 For the sake of consistency in this text, the quote presented here follows geographer Andrew Merrifield’s reversal of de Certeau’s terms as Merrifield was trying to match them with the more widespread English studies in human geography (see also previous footnote): Andrew Merrifield, ‘Place and Space: A Lefebvrian Reconciliation’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers: New Series*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (1993), pp. 528–529.

4 Randviir, *Ruumisemiootika: tähendusliku maailma kaardistamine*, p. 185.

5 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, tr. J. O’Neil (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1973) (first pub. 1969).

regulations, such as traffic rules, health and safety regulations, etc., which can be summed up as public order and which also have to be available, visible and read out when necessary. It could be stated that public order operates as the metastructural self-description or grammar of public space as semiosphere. The body of metatexts binds public space into an ordered structure, individual signs into a language, urban space into urban culture.

Michel de Certeau compares the space created by urban planners to the normative level of linguistics and grammar — ‘the right meaning’⁶. An even more critical stance is taken by French philosopher Henri Lefebvre, a major influence on the study of human geography, in that top-down urban planning creates ‘an illusion of rationality’ in order to disguise the true irrational purposes of *power*. This is the level that is dominant for the policeman, the official and other public authorities, whose operation and communication is formal, well-documented and reasoned.⁷ It is the level which, based on the interests of the elite who owns and governs space, strives towards an unequivocal presentation of the space, which is by nature divergent, emergent, controversial and equivocal; that is, aims to turn dialogue into monologue.

There is a statement in urban studies that decorative objects — fountains, monuments, etc. — added into public space will create more space. Even though physically, free space is thus decreased, the monumental art adds symbolic and narrative layers to space, whereby the perceived space expands. Expansion in this context means not an increase in freedom and uncertainty but growth in semiotisation, in the amount of rules and signs.

Discussing objects in monumental art which claim ground on public space, Lefebvre describes them as ‘the speech of power’: monuments and memorials embody an institutionalised history, rules of conduct cast in solid matter. In traditional monumental art, it is indeed easy to recognise a signifying and speaking practice, which is top down, directed from the elite to the masses: an imperial essence exudes from persons and events (mainly military conflicts) selected for perpetuation as well as from the monuments’ high pedestals and noble materials, emphasising persistence and stability.

6 Michel de Certeau, *Igapäevased praktikad* [The Practice of Everyday Life] (University of Tartu Press, 2005), p. 161.

7 Anu Haamer, ‘Nimetamisest linnas: protsess ja selle tasandid’ [On name production in city space: the process and its levels], *Acta Semiotica Estica V* (Tartu: Estonian Semiotics Association, 2008), p. 71.

As proper conduct is being produced in such well-designed public spaces,⁸ it could be stated that there is no radical difference between e.g. the Statue of Liberty and traffic lights.

In the 20th century, however, a change occurred in the tradition: the modernist urban sculpture distanced itself from the imperial monumental practice, discarded the obligatory pedestals and stepped down to the level of the common man. Even more crucial was distancing from the overwhelming narrativity of historic monuments. The response of modernism was self-contained silence. Analysing the 1960s land-art projects, Robert Smithson uses the concept of *nonsite*,⁹ which he defines as site-specificity owning a clearly delineated space and a finite inner logic. It can be suggested that modernism thus managed to detach itself from national memory politics but the silence, intended for a radical denial, turned out to be nondescript enough and soon, the abstract formal games were harnessed for corporate sculptures on squares in front of skyscrapers or communal sculptures in commuter towns whereas the avant-garde fringe of land art moved into the periphery, to the ranches of eccentric patrons and unpopulated salt lakes. As art scholars Cameron Cartiere and Shelly Willis have noted, that resulted in public art ongoingly having a secondary status in the art world, as it is considered to be synonymous with compromise, dilution and dependency.¹⁰

With the emergence of post-modern geography¹¹ in the 1980s, the concept of space as a social production gained overall acceptance, largely thanks to Henri Lefebvre's works. As in Michel Foucault's heterotopias, Lefebvre's understanding of space is permeated by the totalising aspect of power: constitution of space is a process where individual behaviour can create and signify space but is also prescribed by the same space.

In addition to the above remarks on Henri Lefebvre's attitude towards traditional monumental art, it should be mentioned that Lefebvre was also fairly well informed of

8 Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (London and Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), p. 72.

9 Robert Smithson, 'The Spiral Jetty', [1972], in *Robert Smithson, the collected writings*, Jack Flam (ed.) (Los Angeles, 1996), pp. 152–153 (referred to in Jane Rendell, 'Space, Place, and Critical Spatial Arts Practice', in Cameron Cartiere and Shelly Willis (eds.), *The Practice of Public Art* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008), p. 38).

10 Cameron Cartiere and Shelly Willis, 'Introduction', in Cartiere and Willis (eds.), *The Practice of Public Art*, p. 1.

11 The concept comes from Edward Soja and can largely be considered synonymous to *human geography*.

the more avant-garde artistic spatial practice. Among other things, he had frequent and controversial communication with Guy Debord¹² and also shared the situationist view that public space constitutes a battleground of different narratives, a spatial formation of capitalism and politics, aiming to govern everyday life. But while in his early works, Lefebvre was rather enthusiastic about the public artistic intervention,¹³ even seeing it as an opportunity for a revolutionary intervention into the social order in its broadest sense, then in his best known work, *The Production of Space* (1980; first pub. 1974), Lefebvre stops attributing much potential to public artistic interventions and *détournement*, finding that whereas such diversions may expose the logic of creating new spaces, they are eventually not productive enough to initiate a more lasting social change.¹⁴

Regardless of Lefebvre's scepticism over artistic practice, the concept in post-modern geography of space as a producer of social order rehabilitated public art by positioning it, in a number of ways, back into the pioneering fringe of the avant-garde. The officially organised and semiotised space — central squares, monuments, underground railway stations, etc. — regained priority for radical social art, for in order to intervene into social order, the intervention has to occur where ordering takes place.¹⁵ In response to modernist arrogance as well as Lefebvre's pessimism, artist and critic Suzanne Lacy introduced the concept of *new genre public art*¹⁶ in the 1990s, signifying a shift towards community-specificity. This means that besides taking into account the architectural and natural site-specificity of a location, the contemporary public art is also expected to engage the community daily using the location. The shift towards community-specificity required a reinterpretation of *artwork* as such: compared to the earlier practice of public art, which valued qualities of permanence, continuity, certainty and groundedness, the change in making sense of public space involved valuing uncertainty,

12 See e.g. 'Henri Lefebvre on the Situationist International': Interview conducted and translated 1983 by Kristin Ross: Printed in *October* 79, Winter 1997 <<http://www.notbored.org/lefebvre-interview.html>>, accessed 1 May 2012.

13 Henri Lefebvre also elaborated on the concept of *momentums*, which pretty much overlaps with Guy Debord's concept of situations.

14 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Malden, Me.: Blackwell Publishing, 1991) (first pub. 1974), p. 168.

15 Malcom Miles, 'Critical Spaces: Monuments and Changes', in Cartiere and Willis (eds.), *The Practice of Public Art*, p. 77.

16 Suzanne Lacy, *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle, Wash.: Bay Press, 1995).

instability, ambiguity and impermanence in art.¹⁷ This is based on the assumption that a work seeking to enter into a productive dialogue with the heterogeneous community daily using the public space cannot be a completed one but, rather, has to be an indicator or an intrigue which, for realising itself, needs audience presence and response (among other things, this means that a work may realise itself by the fact of being prohibited and removed). The ephemerality of an artistic work or action (which was one of the central arguments for Lefebvrian scepticism) tends towards a positive meaning in that context as the theatricality ensuing from temporariness induces an estrangement effect and compels citizens to consider it meaningful and, consequently, to reflect upon their environment.¹⁸

As characterised by Miwon Kwon, the focus of contemporary public art has shifted from artist to audience and from production to reception.¹⁹ Several artists acting in contemporary public space have indeed emphasised that they have no authoritarian control over their works (nor do they desire any) but they set up an intrigue to ‘then . . . sit in the armchair watching the consequences’.²⁰ In conclusion, it can be stated that new genre public art as communication act comes to life neither by sermonising nor by silent contemplation but by public discussions, by bursts of communal narrativity and signification.

Regarding the developmental aspects outlined above, it was quite natural for Cameron Cartiere and Shelly Willis, in the introduction to their 2008 collection of essays *The Practice of Public Art*, to issue an appeal to treat public art not as an open-air version of sculpture, architecture, performance and the like, but as an entirely distinct fine-art discipline which has its own history and developmental logic and which should be defined neither by a genre nor a medium but by its relationship to public space and its everyday users.

As the appeal is still fairly recent, one would need to ‘sit in the armchair watching with interest’ whether and how authors, audience and art historians will respond.

17 Kwon, *One Place After Another*, p. 160.

18 Randviir, *Ruumisemiootika*, p. 180.

19 Kwon, *One Place After Another*, p. 106.

20 Johanna Niesyto, ‘Integrieren/Vernetzen: Kampagnen im Zeichen des Netzwerkparadigmas — ein Paradoxon’, in Sigrid Baringhorst et al., *Unternehmenskritische Kampagnen: Politischer Protest im Zeichen digitaler Kommunikation* (Heidelberg: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften / Springer Fachmedien, 2010), p. 305.