

Should artists be government supported activists?²⁰

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ABSTRACT

Public art is a multifaceted field of inquiry; it encompasses a wide variety of creative expressions in the public realm. From memorials and historical monuments to contemporary installations and performance events, the possibilities are endless. Each public art program's intention varies; definitions and generalizations are not commonly held. Some communities see public art as a way of enhancing or personalizing otherwise impersonal spaces. Others view it as a means to activate civic dialogue or provide a vehicle for the community to express its identity. The process of creating public art necessarily involves interaction among

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many interests; it is a cooperative, somewhat theaterlike production with many individuals playing a part in creating a common goal. As people of different perspectives and positions seek to make decisions cooperatively, the result can be dynamic, inviting, engaging, and sometimes contentious. Even if it is recognized that past expression of public art spoke universalist and modernist themes, recent practices of public art are characterized by a strong collaborative effort between public artist and the community and are intended both to design the physical appearance of the city and to rebuild the relationship that underpin urban life. In such a context the present paper try to trace changes in the aesthetic content of public art form and to relate those changes to the circumstances in which art is produced, evaluated and rewarded. More specifically it calls into question the new role artists are called to play in contemporary public art and it discusses a change in the relation between art and the society. As far as public art seems to make an explicit commitment to a relationship with the world, the present paper tries on the one hand to contextualize this shift and to discuss its apparent novelty compared to past art practices; on the other hand it seeks to enlighten risk and externalities related to the present conception of public art which seems to contradicts the traditional view of art as an alternative/radical practice implying a sort of revolutionary, anti-mainstream outlook and be transformed into a social services practice.

RESUMEN

El arte público es un campo multifacético de la investigación, que abarca una amplia variedad de expresiones creativas en el ámbito público. De los monumentos y los monumentos históricos a las instalaciones actuales y los eventos de rendimiento, las posibilidades son infinitas. Cada programa de arte público varía, las definiciones y las generalizaciones no son comunes. Algunas comunidades ven el arte público como una forma de mejorar o personalizar los espacios de una manera impersonal. Otros lo ven como un medio para activar el diálogo cívico o proporcionar un vehículo para la comunidad para expresar su identidad. El proceso de creación de arte público implica necesariamente la interacción entre los intereses de muchos, es una cooperativa de producción, con muchas personas a jugar un papel en la creación de un objetivo común. Como personas de diferentes perspectivas y posiciones a tratar de tomar decisiones en forma cooperativa, el resultado puede ser dinámico, atractivo, interesante, y , a veces, polémico. Aún cuando se reconoce que la expresión anterior de arte público trató de temas universalistas y modernistas, las prácticas recientes de arte público se caracterizan por un gran esfuerzo de colaboración entre el artista y el público en la comunidad y están destinados tanto para diseñar la

aparición física de la ciudad y reconstruir la relación en que se basa la vida urbana. En tal contexto, el presente trabajo intenta rastrear los cambios en el contenido estético del arte público y de relacionar los cambios en las circunstancias en las que el arte se produce, evaluados y recompensados. Más específicamente, se pone en tela de juicio el papel de nuevos artistas están llamados a desempeñar en el arte público contemporáneo y discute un cambio en la relación entre el arte y la sociedad. En cuanto a arte público parece tener un compromiso explícito de una relación con el mundo, el presente artículo pretende, por una parte de contextualizar este cambio y para discutir su aparente novedad respecto a las prácticas de arte del pasado, por el contrario se trata de iluminar de riesgos y externalidades relacionadas con la concepción actual del arte público que parece en contradicción con la visión tradicional del arte como una práctica alternativa / radical que implica una especie de revolucionario, las perspectivas de lucha contra la corriente principal y se transforme en una práctica de los servicios sociales.

Key Words: *Public art, community art, art jobs*

1.The social shift in public art

During the last few years a new set of assumptions about the role of the artist has emerged as part of what is being called the “new genre public art” (Lacy 1995) which, according to artist and critic Susan Lacy, takes the form of interactive, community-based projects inspired by social issues. This new form of public art, often termed “art in the public interest”, was developed as a critic against the well-known commissioned “drop sculptures” in streets, plazas and buildings dated to the mid-1960s. It represents a transition from an earlier model of public art that involved the location of sculptural works in sites administered by public agencies in view of the fact that on the one hand it tends to be less concerned with producing objects per se than with a process of collaboration that is understood to produce certain pedagogical effects in and on the community; on the other hand it seems to extend the possibilities of public art to include a critique of the relations of art to the public domain. As far as questions raised by the interaction of artists and communities have played a central role in its evolution, regional and local authorities, for whom “community”, “participation” and “collective action” have become contemporary buzzwords, have been keen to exploit its inclusive nature. In such a context which is the relationships between the artist and the administrative apparatus of the city? Does the artist keep his/her anti-mainstream outlook or does public money complicate the mission of art?

In the following paragraphs I will try to answer this questions both making use of the most recent literature on public art and presenting the outcomes of a qualitative research examining the social aims of public art within regeneration initiatives. This investigation, realized in 2008 and 2009, consists of 34 qualitative interviews to experts, curators, mediators, artists and administrators actively involved in public art programmes in Italy and in the USA.

The discussion will be divided into three sections. In the first section, paragraphs 1 and 2, I will examine the character of the artist. Firstly, on an historical perspective, I will take into account past and present assumptions on the role of the artist within the society.

Secondly I will focus on today artists actively involved in new genre public art actions and I will analyze the main features of their professional practice. Issues such as “multiple-activity”, “co-authoriality” and “civic engagement” will be discussed.

In the second section I will analyze the governmental context within which community-based public art operates. I will briefly present to opposite models of government support for the arts, the American and the Italian system, and I will delineate opportunities and constraints embodied in both systems. The necessity of a shift in the role of local and regional communities toward public art programmes financing will be discussed.

In the final section I will make a point between section one and section two and I will return to my focus, understanding to which extent contemporary public art practices can balance practices of resistance to the establishment and community involvement within public art programmes financed by local and regional authorities. Should artists be government-supported activists? What kind of state provides support for the arts meanwhile fostering creativity per se?

2. What were artists like? What are artists like?

In archaic societies the arts match, on the one hand, with the game and technical experimentation and, on the other hand, with the sacred and everything which is taboo. In that society the artistic activity, especially when it is something different from crafts, is generally the privilege of marginal or religious (Zolberg 1994; Tota 2002; Heinich 2004). From patrons to clients, from renaissance workshops to academia, from medieval times to the XVIII century, the artist slowly abandoned the margins of the society to slowly gain a more recognizable role and social identity. The criterion of aesthetic quality had gradually been replaced as evaluative criterion by technical skills: the value of work is no longer dependent from the cost of raw materials which compose them, but depends on quality and reputation of the author (Moulin 1992).

As far as modernization begun, the effects of the

industrial revolution and the advent of the mass society touched also the artists whose audience is not anymore a small niche of upper class representatives but it is rather a wider and indefinite viewers (Vattimo 2008). This first phase of industrialization is marked by a further change. The bohemian artist takes the place of the archetypal artist who had dominated the scene until the XVIII century (Heinich 2005). On the practical side this shift takes into account the transformation of the artistic practice from a professional paradigm characterized by team working and collaborative efforts, as typically exemplified by well known renaissance workshops such as “la bottega del Ghirlandaio”, to a vocational paradigm singled out by the importance of solo authorship. Although, as Heinich assesses, examples of genius and recklessness can be found elsewhere, in the XIX century rebellion became institutionalized and the exception normalized (Heinich 2005).

Later, when industrialization is in part accomplished, the idea of the artist as a radical and revolutionary actor will progressively be replaced by cultural industry artist (Vattimo 2008). Turned into producers and directors, artists abandon their bohemian way of life to be employed within the cultural industries and, as a consequence, the artwork turns out to be a profession (Becker 1982). Industrialization is therefore an ambivalent process: on the one hand it creates an elitist system whose supremacy depends on the creation of sealed languages, inaccessible to the majority of the

audience (Benjamin 1963), on the other hand, it also creates an art market within which the artwork is industrially produced and commercially sold (De Paz 1985, Zolberg 1994; Heinich 2004). At present we still experience the legacy of the industrial era: the art system is still strongly divided into “pure” and “commercial” or, using Becker’s words, into «integrated professionals» and «mavericks»²². Anyway this binary descriptions doesn’t takes into account the richness of contemporary art worlds.

More recently Passeron, for example, suggested to take into account besides this two categories also the “engaged artist” (Passeron 1991) who makes an explicit commitment to a relationship with the society and who is characterized by a political vision. Is this the case of new genre public art? As the field grows and evolves at a rapid pace, a single reply can hardly be given. The intention and the desired outcomes of each program vary. For most public agencies, public art may be defined as “work created by artists for places accessible to and used by the public,” but the variety of public art encompasses a much broader spectrum of

²² Becker assumes that reality is characterized by different artistic worlds and that they should be understood as sub-cultural systems, each one with its own individual character. Starting from this premise, he distinguishes four group of artists, depending on the mode of participation in the art world: mavericks, integrated professionals, naive and folk artists. This typology shows how art can, at the same time, have a built-in social character, with the professionals, or request a moment of criticism and opposition to the established order with the mavericks (Becker, 1982).

activities and approaches. Furthermore, although in the past, through instituting public art projects in disadvantages and fragmented communities, policy makers consciously tried to promote a fallacious sense of shared space, true urban art would not embrace a purely decorative function and would not hesitate to break with the conventions that mark the political use of public art.

Recent practices of public art are characterized by a strong collaborative effort between public artist and the community and are intended both to design the physical appearance of the city and to rebuild the relationship that underpin urban life. Public art can thus be numbered within the expressive forms of resistance to mainstream trends. It seems to drive artist attention on issues set apart by institutionalized contemporary art. If, in fact, since the XX century, the art community has lost its contact with the public, public art tries to mend the gap between the languages of the arts and those of ordinary people electing public space as the medium to test this opportunity. In the world of public art we face a change in the artist's tasks.

Firstly artists are more and more involved in the social context where they work. Secondly the context of artistic production tends to expand and both the way of working and the artist's professional identity seem to become less solipsistic. Thirdly, although according to Crane (2010) the world of contemporary art experiences an increasing division of labor between "art workers" and "art thinkers",

the world of public art continues to move toward an understanding of the artist as a “craftsman”. The latter, in fact, manipulates the artworks personally and his the artistic director of a complex process of ideation and construction which can involve also residents. The collaboration with craftsmen is not excluded although artists working in the public art realm engage industrial or specialized art fabricators mostly for the construction of very large, industrial, labor intensive and time-consuming art works.

3. Multiple-activity, co-authoriality and civic engagement

The professional identity of a public artist is not easily confinable within a solid and shared definition. If the expertise, or in other words to be graduated at the school of public art, is not a criterion around which building a professional profile of the artists who work in the public realm which other parameters have to be taken into account? According to the on field research, the professional profile of public art is built around three pillars: multiple-activity, co-authoriality and civic engagement. Multiple-activity refers to the fact the actors, in this case artists, are usually involved in multiple jobs at the same time. This means they are artists but they are also curator or trainer. This is not surprising neither innovative. In fact although mono-activity was a standard in modern times, multiple-activity is the trend of post-modernity. Anyway it is

important to notice which are the typical “other activities” performed by the artists who work in the public realm.

The older generation is composed mainly but artist who work also as curator. The intermediate generation instead, especially in the USA, see the participation of artist who are also architect or landscape architects. The younger generation see the participation of artists who are also social activists. These shifts are not meaningless. As far as public art abandoned the traditional “sculpture” paradigm and became a tool for regenerating public space, the artists also became spatial professionals. And more recently, as far as public art embraced the public realm artists declined their activities also within the public sphere.

The second point is then co-authoriality. Public art creation involves different actors. The public artist most commonly interacts with urban planners, architects, and city agencies concerned with the administration of public buildings and spaces mainly at the stage of ideation. Communitybased public artist more commonly interacts with social service agencies and social workers (women’s shelters, homeless advocates, neighborhood groups, etc.) at the stage of ideation but he/she can engage inhabitants or local craftsman at the stage of creation (Fourmentraux 2008). In each case the interaction between the artist and the community is mediated through a discursive network of professional institutions and ideologies that the artist collaborates with and, in some cases, seeks to radicalize or

challenge. In recent years, as far as new genre public art spread, the professional practice of public artists expanded to a wider range of experience involving the territory as a whole.

Now this area is an urban park that was created in 1996. Through attending community meetings at this center here which is a neighborhood community center I learned that this area was going to be redone with community input to get better lighting and to tear down some crumbling structures and so on. So I was able to work with the city architect and the person who governmentally heads up this neighborhood [...] So we met with community residents and proposed a three part project. [...] This was another partnership project where at the time this was done there was a lot of lateral organization of these kinds of partnerships in other words no entity was really higher than another one we just kind of all work together that has since changed. But we partnered a lot with a company called Gallery 37 which had as its mission was to employ youth in the arts. (2 CHI A)

The construction of processes that produce nothing tangible, if not relations between individuals, introduce us to the third criterion or, in other words, civic engagement. Public art aims at experimenting models of intervention and

communication capable of reaching diverse audiences and it presupposes the idea of art as a service to citizens. The idea of service opens a discourse on the possibilities for the artist to foster the creation of a social inclusion service and, as a consequence, it opens up the idea that art is a complex professional practice integrated in an economic, social and cultural system which is wider than the one of the traditional art world. The relation artist/resident moves to innovative formulas of territorial. The idea of a “community artist” pushes the art world to reflect on the opportunity liked with taking an active role in cultural and social dynamics of contemporary reality, to discuss the meaning of what can be public and to analyses a wide range of issues such as the relationship between ethics and aesthetics, the possible differences between what is public and what is social etc.

To me that's the distinction between sculpture and public art. One is providing the individual voice, the voice of the artist, and the other is providing a voice for the community that they're working in. So they're very different. There are also different strategies in each of those professions. And there are some strategies that overlap. So for example, if you're doing, large scale outdoor public sculpture, or sculpture for yourself, you're still learning, in both cases, you're going to need to learn how to weld, how to caste bronze, how to work with wood and stone, in other

words techniques. In ah, public art though, you have another agenda, on top of this - which is, how to interview a community, to figure out what it is that the community wants, what they think they, umm, need to express themselves through this public art; so in a way you're kind of a shaman, for the community. You - you become the voice for this community. Through you, the community learns how to express its values (8 SEA A).

The increasing demand for public artistic intervention, it raises the question of which is the role of a contemporary artist working in the public space or in the public realm. Public art tends to progressively become an action of civic engagement and the figure of the artist tends to gradually be confused with the one of the militant. The contribution of public art, and as a result of the artist who works in public space, goes far beyond aesthetics. The analysis of the interviews confirms that public art contributes to the creation of meanings that bond cultures and, in particular, create bonds within communities. It enriches the public sphere and especially strengthens democracy and the creation of a more participatory society.

We were very engaged in the idea of how will people use this, how do we, using both art and architecture make them comfortable so that they are willing to go

underground and be comfortable and ride back and forth. Stations had to be very open, they had to be well lighted, they, you know, they had to do certain things. We couldn't just do something cool if it made also made people uncomfortable about being underground. So the artist had to get engaged with the notion what is a bus tunnel and how does it really work they couldn't just make it something because they felt like making it. And that goes to the very core of public art as a tool for civic engagement, is that you get the artist engaged in why people are using the space as much as they get engaged in what artistic idea they're working on at the moment. And that's the difference between public art and not public art (6 SEA A).

4. State support: directors and observers

The transformation envisaged in the art practices go hand in hand with the evolution of public art. As already stated in the previous pages, in the last thirty years art practices in the public space progressively discarded the aesthetic paradigm typical of former public art productions and became a tool for physical, and recently also social, urban regeneration (Cameron, Coaffee 2005; Sacco 2006). As I mentioned earlier, this turn in the practices and in the aims of public art determines a change in the role of the artist too. The latter seems actually distant from the romantic character of the bohemian artist: while romantic artists used to work within

the walls of their studios and to specialize within a singular field of the visual arts, contemporary artist working in the public art realm chose to work in the public space, to interact more frequently with the community which lives or work in that public space, are usually more interested in social issues and they are also keen to work in with different raw materials in several dissimilar environments.

Anyway, it should be noticed that the social turn in public art affected, besides artists, local and regional authorities. Assuming an historical point of view, we can in fact associate at least three different meaning to state support for the public art field. In the sixties and in the seventies, when art in public spaces was the main approach to public art intervention, artists, planners and architects intended public art as a tool of aesthetic enhancement and completely denied its ability to interact effectively with architecture and to transform the quality of the space. The case for support of the arts by the state was based on market failures. In such a context the financial support was intended for artist or arts organization in line with official art policy. They could receive considerable support from the concentrated funds which the government disposed. Artists who asked for support had at least to conform to the formal requirements established by the state. This reduce their artistic freedom, and in practice the chance of getting support was clearly higher if the kind of artistic project submitted suited the tastes of the party and politicians in power.

Artists and arts organizations out of line with what is defined as “good art”, or even as “art” at all, by the government find it most difficult and often impossible to get public support. As a result, local and regional support for the arts, either in Italy and in the USA, was characterized by large and lumpy artistic expenditures. Preference in the choice was given to widely known artists who were already considered celebrities within the world of contemporary art and whose artwork were considered as part of the mainstream production. For example in 1967 the City of Chicago, commissioned a sculpture, today known as *The Chicago Picasso* (see Figure 1), which has been realized by Pablo Picasso; in 1968 the city of Seattle, commissioned Isamu Noguchi the *Black Sun* (see Figure 2); finally in 1979 the city of Turin acquired *Rotonda Maroncelli* by Arnaldo Pomodoro (see Figure 3).



Figure 1- Pablo Picasso. The Chicago Picasso. Chicago, IL



Figura 2- Isamu Noguchi. Black Sun. Seattle, WA



Figura 3 - Arnaldo Pomodoro. Rotonda Maroncelli, Turin Italy

Anyway since the eighties, with the development of the paradigm known as art as public space - which reflects the idea that art can make the space more human and that it may help to overcome the sense of alienation generated by the urban landscape – local and regional administration, especially in the USA, seemed to look for a strategy aimed at improving the integration between artistic intervention and city planning. This intentionality was initially declined

in the creation of flagships projects which emphasized the cities' image and perception. The art project was functional to the promotion of cultural tourism and was intended to attract creative class workers (Florida 2002).

How did this kind of government support affect artistic creativity? The answer is controversial. Advocate on the one hand have produced investigations aimed at demonstrating – through case studies – that state support didn't limit artistic expression and have positively contributed to the enhancement of local artistic creativity itself (Finkelppearl 2003). On the other hand, the most skeptical and sharpest critics have argued against what they define as a purely rhetorical use of arts, shedding light on the shift in public arts intrinsic value as an instrument of criticism mainly stating that the latter has been lost in favor of an “ornamental” role or reduced by the co-option of culture to marketing purposes (Miles 1997; Hall, Robertson 200; Miles, Hall 2003).

This paradigm, as might have favored the interest of many governments towards the promotion of artistic programmes, raised serious reservations, because on the one hand it transformed public art works into one of the stages of the conventional city tourist visit and, on the other hand, it transformed artist into builders and planners. In this stage the case for support of the arts by the state was based on aesthetic enhancement needs. The financial support was intended for artist or arts organization keen to

collaborate/cooperate with the institution. Artists chosen to work within a public art programme for the regeneration of public space had at least to conform to the formal requirements established by local and regional authorities or to the formal needs expressed by the Public Utilities Department *de facto* financing the public art works.

This is especially the case of USA where city and county administrations employed “*Percent-for-art programs*”²³ in order to fund public artworks. As a result the artists’ anti-mainstream outlook was again put aside. Nevertheless, the controversy about this approach paved the way for a different use of Public Art so that, in a further phase, the government takes the move away from the instrumental approach and identifies artistic intervention as both an economic and a social tool. In particular they recognized that public art fosters the development of local community identity. Anyway it should be noticed that public art projects designed to regenerate urban areas have often led to a dynamic of gentrification and compromised the historical authenticity of the site (Zukin 2009), have highlighted the fact that economic interests often prevail over social ones and have revealed the gap between the aims of public administration and those of citizens.

²³ It refers to a program, often a city ordinance, where a fee, usually some percentage of the project cost, is placed on large scale development projects in order to fund and install public art.

This phase, however, allowed the government to understand that, in order to reconcile the economic dimension and the social dimension of a place, new forms of inclusive urban governance should have taken into account. Citizens, in particular, had to become the active actors of the art making process (Sacco 2006). In this third phase, which often coincide with the emergence of the paradigm known as art in the public interest, artists seems to regain their antimainstream power: acting as the voices of local communities they obtain a new power toward resistance to local and regional government. This is particularly true in Italy. In fact, although in the USA state support is still a major tool for public art financing, in Italy local and regional authorities don't play a central role in financing programmes for arts in the public space and private philanthropy far outweighs public spending in this sector. Does this facilitate the emergence of a political and critical eye of the art?.

On the one hand the Italian context offers more opportunity toward the development of an antimainstream outlook of the public art: as far as public art programmes are rarely publicly financed and as far as local and regional authorities are not developing percentage for art programmes, the space for critical debate is potentially wider that elsewhere. Anyway I would say potentially but not really. In fact the lack of financing sources (private expenditure is usually smaller and less continuous compared to public investment) has clear consequences in the practices

of public art: most of the project realized are, in fact, temporary experimentation that last for few days and have short term legacies in terms of public impact. Although they often carry a critical message, the latter hardly remain impressed in people's mind because of the eventual nature of the art work. American local and regional authorities, far from being the observers of this change in public art, decided to have a clear role of directors and, of course, to exploit the opportunity of using public art as a tool for urban governance. In such a context I believe that art can still play a critical and "resistance" role toward the government. As far as artist became the voice of the community there is still a place for art protesting the system. But the question is: to which extent this critical eye is somewhat "planned"? Do local and regional authorities intend to exploit the resistance power of public art? And, as a consequence, does state support for public art finally transform public art into public service?

Conclusion: public art or public service?

As the city grows, public planner and city administrators are no longer able to keep up with the pace of change since they rely on outdated models of governance. For cities to thrive, to be communicative and alive, and to function as catalyzers of public life it is necessary to stimulate civic participation and community involvement. Designing a space, as stated in previous paragraphs, is not sufficient to create a place or

to enhance a given inhabited situation. As a consequence effective urban planning actions or projects should deal with citizens and, more precisely, have to involve inhabitants in the decision making process. This because the perfect aesthetic of the physical appearance of a city or of a suburbs itself is not guarantee of a successful regeneration actions. Policymaker, as far as they don't want to build a fallacious sense of place, have to rely on participation and urban governance: planning should mean focusing upon identities, values, and images as real actors able to engender behaviors and, thus, to shape places. In such a respect, a plan would better work if conceived as a process, whereby the inhabitant could recognize its identity, and identify the necessary factors for a path of growth also corresponding to an evolution of meaning. In other words, a planning project and intervention should not simply correspond to the realization of an artifact: urban planning depends on the quality of the interaction between local administrators and the involved inhabitants. Structuring the relational exchange since the very beginning will assure a deeper motivation and, thus, a higher level of sustainability.

As community participation has become a constant expectation in urban regeneration, so too has public art been celebrated as a way to deliver it. Because of its dynamics and because of the collaborative process that undergoes its realization, public art, since its very beginning, engenders the development of a relational layer, either within residents

and between residents and other social actors which is certainly a structural condition for a sustainable planning process. Public art procedure involves the inhabitants through the whole process, starting with an analyzing phase, developed with a few representatives, and continuing with a dialogue addressed to the entire community involved. In this way the artifact is built on the basis of shared values and perspectives of commitment, engendering motivation. Moreover, the emotional factor accompanying the shaping of the relational text imprints the sense of involvement even with higher effectiveness.

Opportunities and risk incorporated in the use of public art within the context of urban regeneration practices have largely been described throughout the paper; the latter doesn't align itself with either point of view but it tries to present the limits and advantages connected to the use of public art in the context of urban regeneration. It deals with the reality that public art and cultural initiatives are widely used in urban contexts under the banner of regeneration, with the intention to achieve some degree of social impact. Nevertheless a critical issue is finally addressed: should artists be government supported activist? The risk of instrumentalisation of public art programmes is not disregarded. Anyway public financing seem to assure the continuity art programmes need. In order to avoid policy makers exploitation it is finally suggested to take into account an equal participation of all actors involved.

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