

## CITY DESIGN :THE NEED FOR A SPATIAL IDENTITY AND THE ROLE OF PUBLIC ART.A SEMIOTIC APPROACH. PIPILOTTI RIST AND BILL VIOLA IN VENICE

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### ABSTRACT

As far as the construction of a community's identity and territory is concerned, the question about the usefulness of a project of public art is a priority in any kind of initiative. Especially when the public dimension makes the intervention subject to ideological manipulations. It is necessary to establish if the potentialities of the work of art are worthy of the risk of its exploitation. I'll try to answer to this question on one hand stressing the importance of the spatial support in the construction of new territorial identities. On the other hand I'll specify the ways in which the artistic device can help this process. I'm proposing semiotics as an instrument of control: the reason lays in the communicational value of the artistic project and in its cognitive role in terms of image. The power of image is in its figurative features, but also in the ability of continuously establishing webs of relations, possibly subject to manipulation. Semiotics contributes with the description of values underlay to a specific artistic project, as a deep founding level of its conception: at the same time, it enables us with the possibility to control those meaning distortions which can transform the artistic project in a disaggregating factor.

### RESUMEN

Cuando abordamos la construcción de la identidad de una comunidad y el territorio, la pregunta sobre la utilidad de un proyecto de arte público es una prioridad en cualquier tipo de iniciativa. Especialmente cuando la dimensión pública hace que la intervención pueda estar sujeta a manipulaciones ideológicas. Es necesario establecer si las potencialidades de la obra de arte son dignas de los riesgos de su explotación. Voy a intentar responder a esta pregunta, por un lado, destacando la importancia de la distribución espacial de apoyo en la construcción de nuevas identidades territoriales. Por otro lado voy a especificar las formas en que el dispositivo artístico puede ayudar a este proceso. Estoy proponiendo la semiótica como instrumento de análisis: la razón por la cual establece el valor de la comunicación del proyecto artístico y su función cognitiva en términos de imagen. El poder de la imagen no sólo se encuentra en sus rasgos figurativos, sino también en la capacidad de establecer redes continuas de relaciones, posiblemente sujetas a la manipulación. La Semiótica contribuye con la descripción de los valores base de un proyecto artístico, como un profundo nivel de fundación de su concepción: al mismo tiempo, nos permite la posibilidad de controlar el sentido de las distorsiones que pueden transformar el proyecto artístico en un factor de desagregación.

**KEYWORDS:** Semiotics, Communication, Public Art, Public Space

### The role of space.

Shortly, I'd like to start with some arguments in favour of a physically based project of identity: as the anthropologist Appadurai wrote, "*the nature of the human concern with intimacy, with friendship, with attachment, with predictability, with routine, and even with what we may call ordinary life is such that it simply cannot work with entirely abstract or virtual, or mediated, or imagined communities... We seem to need things to which we have access of an embodied type.*"

If on one hand we have to describe new forms of territorial constructions, structured by webs (Badie) ; if we observe the dematerialisation of the city, overwhelmed by the logics of floods and the virtualisation of relationships, technologically replaced, the fundamental question is about space. Do we still need space to sustain identity? Which can be the role of setting in producing identity?

Again, to quote Appadurai, "*...in the world in which we live the imagination actually can reach into multiple scales and spaces and forms and possibilities. These can become part of the toolkit through which the structure of feeling can be produced locally. Locality, in the end, may still have something to do with scale and place, and with the body, but with the difference that the horizons of globality, through media and the work of the imagination, can become part of the material through which specific groups of actors can envision, project, design and produce whatever kind of local feeling they wish to produce...we need some spatialized local, which cannot in the end be tossed away*"

According to Heidegger, to inhabit is to be and to be is to inhabit.

From an economical and social point of view Castells underlines the importance of a local logic, first of all for the continuity of the productive system. In an economical perspective, in fact, we should have to consider that the reproduction of labour forces is possible only in a locally defined ambience. Moreover, a local based organisation has the power to oppose global floods as causes of identity's desegregation .

In the field of urban design, Kevin Lynch is an important reference, well known for his bottom-up approach. In this perspective, the citizen has to be considered the fulcrum of the planning process, consequently conveying the attention to a completely new range of materials, such as perceptions and images. The identity of a place is the base for its identification as a condition for grounding processes. The beginning of spatial and social rituals of appropriation can individuate in public art a very useful tool.

Finally, in the perspective of cognitive sciences, represented by Francisco Varela, men and cities are complex systems, continuously informed by the context. The development of a system is constantly shaped by the relationship with the environment.

So space is necessary.

Some questions arise about the possibilities and qualities of spatially set interactions with the human inhabitant.

Heidegger, Varela and, between them, Merleau Ponty, teach that the world comes to us passing through perceptions, which shape our being and build identity.

The image is the material being exchanged between a man and his environment: and in fact Lynch's *image of the city* is the project of a city in which the sense of place is produced by clear and vivid images. In a few words, we could say that everything can reinforce an image, conveying its legibility and vividness, helps the configuration of an identity project, conceived both as a *structure of feeling* (Appadurai) and as a place.

No doubt that public art can have such a role.

The work of art establishes a communicative exchange with users.

The strategy of this communication can be deeply structured by a *semiotic approach*. Lynch himself considered this science as a useful tool in the construction of places and identity, because necessary to recognize the layer of values underlying a given setting.

Moreover, an important matter dealing with works of public art is *the power of image*, as potential activated in the relationship between work and context. This factor measures the real effectiveness of a work of public art in a given context, pointing out its possibilities of assimilation and weak points.

Communicative possibilities are defined in a complex superimposition of layers. Objects of public art, for example architecture, establish a relationship with users composing meaningful layers strictly related to the spatial and temporal conjuncture. Considering the inhabitant as the aim in designing the city, considering the grounding mechanisms previously described, semiotics provides us with some tools to describe the dynamics produced by the installation of a work of art in a urban context. It is necessary to notice that, at the present day, we are dealing with semiotic approaches finally far from the linguistic orthodoxies of the 70's. The concerned subject is no more an absolute sign, but a communicative system organised in a spatial-temporal context, in the relationship of different users. Consequently, as a site specific intervention, a work of public art can be described by semiotics as a discipline dealing with contextualized communications. Semiotic categories analyse the way in which the power of an image is produced, as determinant factor for the quality of the relationship established by the work of art within a given context. More precisely, semiotic perspective gives the possibility to understand how social, anthropological and environmental values find their expressive strategy: it is just the pertinence of values to a specific context that qualifies the degree of identification related to the fruition of a work of art.

We will make reference to this scientific perspective in order to describe what happens in Venice as far as the relationship between public art and identity is concerned.

### **Pipilotti Rist and Bill Viola in Venice**

The Biennale of Contemporary Art in Venice represents an exceptional moment in which public art is renewed, in a dialogue with contemporary art producing forms of a urban activation in other contexts represented by site specific events and installations vitalizing the urban tissue.

The map of the pavilions distributed in the city describe the proportion of an expanding process of the exhibition, initially concentrated in the Giardini Napoleonici and now finally interesting churches, courts, palaces, bringing them to a new life. The whole city is involved, revitalized by the moving floods of visitors, outdoor spaces transformed in the corridors of a bigger urban installation.

The public side of art plays a role in structuring the urban identity, working on the citizens' mental maps through *interactivity*. The interactive settings are often organized in the context of objects in Italy traditionally considered as public art: churches. In this perspective, contemporary art becomes public,

involving these buildings and becoming, even if temporarily, part of the urban visual and spatial domain. The degree of publicity in the process of fruition will depend on the sharing of a margin, on the possibilities of dialogue with users: this derives from the values involved in such artistic hybridizations, as moments highlighting the evolution of a social identity. In fact, the passing of the centuries is expressed also by a certain distance acquired, which gives the possibility to criticize once untouchable paradigms.

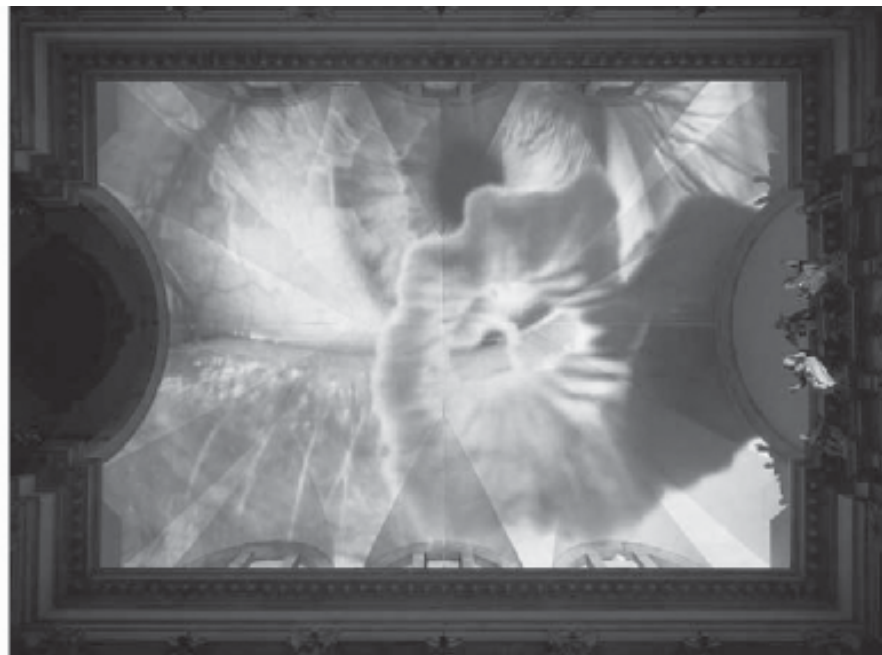
In the Summer of 2005, the 18<sup>th</sup> century Venetian church of San Stae is involved in the Biennale project as setting of the Swiss pavilion, to house Pipilotti Rist work of art, *Homo Sapiens Sapiens*. The economy of this paper doesn't give the possibility to produce a detailed semiotic description. Necessarily, I'll draw the attention only on the most important aspects, in the perspective of the reflection here exposed. Further indications and a methodological frame of reference can be deduced from the works quoted in the bibliography.

Very synthetically, it is recognizable that the artist makes use of expressive possibilities typical of religious buildings, exploiting their communicative strategy to strengthen the message.



The vault, a traditional support for Christian representations of Paradise, conceived to reinforce the expressive strategy of the ritual celebrated in the church, is virtually broken by the video projection of a pre-Christian Eden. In fact, the title of the installation, *Homo Sapiens Sapiens*, immediately highlights a bodily, animal part of man, too often separated from the soul by the attitude of the occidental thought. The projected images describe the dance of two female bodies, in a green setting, a natural dimension still untouched by human interventions. The expressive strategy, the plastic dynamic composition and the sensuous actions recall an approach to the body free from cultural or religious constraints: this points at religious morality, according to which the corporal dimension is the medium for sin.

Paradise is not far from man: it's a balanced condition, which can be reached only having recovered the original unity between Soul and Body, broken by doctrinal and artificial precepts. The spectator is involved by a sensorial strategy, invited to lay down on coloured mattresses, surrounded by the fresh obscurity of the church and by the sounds of the new age music.



The Institutional reaction is not positive: the installation is dismantled and reopened only thanks to a collection of signatures, in the perspective of potential financial incomes useful for the restoration's works. The work of art is definitely site specific: the values proposed are exactly at the opposite side of those usually preached by the Christian message, in favour of the end of any Manichaeism between Soul and Body. The effectiveness of the message is directly related to the features of the setting: a non religious building couldn't have produced such a powerful image.

The obstacle to deal with for the fruition of Rist's work of art it's not a physical one: it doesn't concern the church as a building. Even if identified as a work of public art, a church is also a cult building, necessarily in conflict with Rist's critical position. This contrast has been strategically exploited in terms of image, to reach efficacy in expressing the content.

As we can divine, beyond the surface of provocation, the message is also an invitation to religious attitudes to come closer to the real complexity and needs of the contemporary society and ethical themes. In this perspective, the social role of public art couldn't find a more appropriate expression: the building as a theatre to perform a non superficial debate, to renew an identity too often crystallized in spatial configurations, no more corresponding to the real conjuncture.

In Italy Churches represent a very common form of public art : for this reason I think should be very important to rise some questions about the real possibilities of updating this patrimony, considering it as a potential actor, active in the project of identity, making use of contemporary art forms as occasions to engender confrontation and debate.

The real alternative to a process of mummification of religious architecture and of the values it represents needs the will and courage of a critical attitude towards the established orthodoxy, in favour of a posture closer to the complex and changing identity of our society. As far as the spatial project is concerned, the question is if churches can still be considered as forms of public art, considering the high social responsibility connected to the use of the word public. In this sense, public contemporary art could have the important role of triggering the evolutive process, involving not only the physical building, but inducing a deep revision of the current attitude.

In the case of Pipilotti Rist work of art , the building is a fundamental part of the work of art , necessary for the effectiveness of its message. This means and shows how churches can still be protagonists of projects of public art: just the entity of the institutional reaction measures the importance of this kind of operations, the deep level of consciousness to which contemporary art can bring, touching the major, crucial topics of our society. The arising of a conflict between Church and artist, between dogma and artistic provocation attests the deepness and exactness of a critical message towards a religious attitude far from the actual necessities of our days.

Another artistic intersection offers the possibility to reflect about the compromises between contemporary art and religious settings: the video installation *Ocean without a shore*, a work of Bill Viola





realised in the little church of S. Gallo, in the context of Biennale of Art of 2007. In this case the installation fuses with the building's atmosphere, regenerating its public vocation. The message, in fact, can be considered as a contemporary interpretation of a traditional subject for Christianity, close to its attitude both on the level of values than on the figurative one. *Ocean without a shore* deals with the relationship between life and death, describing the last as an endless peregrination, without an aim, without a shore to reach.

Once more, the building is strictly necessary in the expressive strategy of the work of art. The little square space of the church represents the point of contact between the world of dead and the living world. Three sarcophagi, framed by the architectural scene of the walls, define a threshold: the rectangular shape of three screens suspended over them design a surface, a plan materialised as a water wall by the passage through it of three ghostly figures. We can perceive them, at the beginning of their approach, as blurred figures, confusing with the darkness of the church. Reaching the imaginary plan of the screens, they convey visibility and sensible appearance to the water: passing through it, these mysterious entities gain colour and definition, natural dimension bodies, lost in an endless searching: disappointed, after a few seconds they disappear again in the obscurity behind them. Even in this case the architectural setting determines the expressive strength of the work of art. Unlike Rist, Viola's message has no critical attitude: the shift from life to death is expressed in a new perspective: spectator witnesses the incursions of souls in the living world.

By their expressions, they stir up sympathy: by their approach, they open a communication, revealing the endless dimension of the hereafter. The reflection about the subject of the threshold is treated from the dead's point of view. The invisible surface containing the screens is the expressive solution chosen for the threshold, suspended over the sarcophagi. No best place than a church to set the symbolic beginning of the two different dimensions of existence.

### **The work of public art, between perception and comprehension.**

One of the possibilities of a work of public art, especially in comparison with other institutional forms, is to structure an identity project, by the manipulation of spatial elements and values. This happens in two different ways. On one hand, *perception* origins the individual appropriation of space, involving senses before and more intensively than a rational comprehension. Before any significant identification, the retinal impression becomes the base for symbolic attributions. According to this logic, for example, the *terrains vagues*, so diffused in contemporary urban contexts, become the base for personal interpretations, towards the construction of a plural and democratic system of identities.

On the other hand, in the moment of fruition, communication should be based on *shared values, permitting comprehension*; otherwise, history teaches that values can be imposed by a non-shared system of power. In fact, the vast literature dealing with the relationship between public art and power makes reference to the strategies of manipulation of the equilibrium between social values and power. Architecture is the medium par excellence for this purpose. Cities with an important historical heritage - like a great part of European and Italian cities - witness this logic. Because of this custom, in Italy the expression “public art” evokes first of all the architectural façades, designing squares and atmospheres, expressing power, esthetical and ethical values, from the roman triumphal arcs to the baroque scenes. The expression is still far from immediately identifying the contemporary manner, made of site specific installations, very often contesting the establishment.

In Italy the condition of artistic patrimony is even more static because of uncertain attitudes between marketing and functional transformations, conservative postures and thematic settings. In general, in highly defined, historic contexts, any project of contemporary art has to deal with both conservative and commercial worries. But the question is not only about the role to assign to architectural objects, today unconnected from their original function: it is a priority to understand their position in collective imagination and to which point an intervention of contemporary art involving their spaces could be considered subversive.

In Venice, as in other urban contexts characterized by the presence of a representative, vividly defined historic centre, the situation of public art has to face this kind of reluctance. The real problem is not represented by physical constraints, being possible to easily transform buildings, thanks to a great variety of creative solutions. The metamorphosis of S. Stae in occasion of the current Biennale, for example, offers a spectacular example of these possibilities.



*San Stae's interior transformed for the current Biennale. The installation is completely indifferent to the original setting.*

The important obstacle to consider is the layer of values and symbolic constructions, often crystallized and reinforced by the built space more than by practices, by artistic works transmitting values through the history of centuries.

In the case of a non-representative urban area, an intervention of public contemporary art is usually considered the opportunity to organize new points of reference, useful to structure new territories and characterize citizens' mental maps and habits.

On the contrary, in cities with an important historical heritage, public art traditionally corresponds to religious buildings, conceived as functional spaces and artistic treasures at the same time. The importance of the last meaning is witnessed by the relevance of the multitudes of tourists in search of aesthetic experiences, probably more relevant than the believers' ones.

The question is about the kind of compromise becoming necessary when contemporary art intervenes in traditional domains: where values are specifically defined and consolidated in spatial configurations, able to oppose any possible evolution concerning the identity of a social community. In such historically defined conditions, architecture physically retains the change, a pretext to hand down habits and rituals.

Considering cities charged with important historic heritages, is there a place for contemporary attitudes and projects in the frame of public art ?

The reflections above exposed confirm that a building is more than a functional container. Especially when architecture corresponds with public art, on one hand we have a *physical spatial reference* designing habits and mental maps; on the other hand, we have to consider it as a *significant sign*, defined in a web of social and spatial conventions, identifying the work of art itself. The production and installation of works of contemporary public art, being site specific operations, have to deal with both physical and socio-cultural constraints, as basic elements of the work of art. In fact, the relationship they shape establish the conditions of a possible communication with users and spectators. The way in which this is organised can be described by means of the semiotic discipline: as a tool discovering the strategy linking expressive choices and values, it gives the possibility to identify the real communicative potential of a work of art.

I'll make an example, easily accessible given the setting of this Conference. For a visitor of Barcelona, the work of Rebecca Horn, *Estel Ferit*, far from remaining in a blurred indifference, attracts the attention on two different levels: from a rational point of view, because of the effort to understand or recognize the value of the work, the sense of its relationship with the context; from a perceptive point of view, as a powerful landmark, available to condition our spatial habits, passing through the design of our mental maps, independently from any rational comprehension.

In any case, the independence between comprehension and perception grants the possibility for a work of public art to be a reference point, a physical sign to qualify and *design the sense of a place*. This is especially true for a number of urban spatially undefined fragments, where any kind of visual landmark or even experience becomes the pretext for a territorial construction.

If in terms of perception the work of art can be the object of individual readings and interpretations, letting space to a certain degree of subjectivity, in terms of production it is necessary a preliminary definition of the relationship between work of art and power : an inevitable compromise, especially dealing with a public setting, continuously in tension between constraints and forms of control. Such strengths become particularly important when visually configured by spaces and architectures, as the power of the image they produce fixes habits and values, possibly retaining any kind of change .

Dealing with the superposition of different projects of public art, contemporary and traditional, it will be necessary to analyse the complexity of the communication constantly produced in a urban context. A semiotic approach provides us with tools useful for a transparent reading procedure: starting from the surface of perceptive configuration to reach the deeper, underlying level of values and significance. Notice that the same passages, but in the opposite direction, could guide a project instead of an analysis.

In general, the aim should be to understand the real openness of a given context towards projects of public contemporary art. The case of urban contexts strongly characterized by the presence of religious historical buildings necessarily arise some questions: the most interesting concerns the alternative between a continuity, oriented towards conservation and inertia, and the possibility of a change, often stimulated by the avant-garde perspective of contemporary art.

In my opinion there are great opportunities for churches to preserve an active role in the identity project of a community: because of their powerful presence in terms of visual impact and represented values, churches could be the ideal interlocutor in current debates on society, identity's shifts and ethical

questions. Their space could provide an ideal and effective setting for a confrontation with contemporary art as a triggering factor. Because of this intersection, installations of contemporary art become site specific and churches could be renewed in their social role. The power of the images produced by such hybridisations has the possibility to engender change: *spatially*, qualifying new parts of a urban context; *socially*, pointing out current issues and questioning the individual's ethics and behavioural habits.

## Conclusion

The subject of the relationship between public art and power has often conducted to consider the first as an exploitable resource for the second. And it's true that too often the works of public art can be realised only satisfying the conditions determined by the exponents of the system of power, in this way becoming visual representations of forced values and artificial identity.

But in some cases also those artistic projects having a critical attitude towards institutional forces have gained their place: even if in temporary forms, involving the community in experiences inspired to Deleuze's theories. They are usually set in scarcely configured urban settings, still in search of images and spatial experiences to design identity.

Architectural heritage, charged of symbolic and meaningful contents, arise questions concerning its possible role in retaining evolution and social change.

The case of Venice exemplifies this condition, attracting the attention on the real possibilities for public art works to intervene in contexts preserved by conservative attitudes, more guided by marketing spirit than by an interest in social sharable values.

In Venice works of contemporary public art are absent. Well-known because of its artistic legacy, the city's fame is nowadays sustained more by the glory of the past than by recent projects. The Biennale of Contemporary Art is the unique moment in which urban tissue is interested by contemporary art, as part of public art installations. Once more, the potential of public art is highlighted as regenerating power for depressed or forgotten urban fragments. Difficulties arise when the work of art collides with the level of values underlying an architectural or artistic given setting: static concretions, consolidated by imagination, expressing a socio-cultural condition.

The comparison between Rist's and Viola's works have pointed out the difficulties encountered by contemporary art when dealing with this kind of contexts. In this perspective, a semiotic approach is useful because both hostility and identification emerge in the pattern of a communicational relationship with the user / spectator: the compromise between an institutional power and the community, expressed by the artistic medium, is a question of values, recognizable thanks to a semiotic analysis.

Religious buildings have been the first forms of public art, conceived to design and define identity.

As triumphal arcs for Romans, churches, with their magnificent volumes, have always been not only functional containers, but also conscious and strategic signs of the presence of the religious institutional power. But if in the past faith pervaded and gave sense to every act, to every hour, nowadays we have to face more complex needs, no more satisfied by the anachronistic posture of the institutionalised religiosity. Too often the value of religious buildings is still public because of an aesthetical appreciation, not because of a correspondence with social shared needs.

The opportunity to reactivate the public role depends on the will and possibility to accept dialogue and critical attitudes. Just the physical presence of religious buildings offers the ideal setting for projects of contemporary art, producing an effective debate because of the power of images they can produce. The aim should be not only bringing up-to-date an historic architectural object, but also the production of socially renewing dynamics, with this confirming the social role of public art. Only in this perspective historic objects of architectural heritage can be recovered as spatial actors in a community's identity project.



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