

On the strange place of Public Art in contemporary Art Theory¹²

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“Like the public realm (Öffentlichkeit), the autonomy of art is a category of bourgeois society that both reveals and obscures an actual historical development. All discussion of this category must be judged by the extent to which it succeeds in showing and explaining logically and historically the contradictions inherent in the thing itself.”

Peter Bürger, Theory of the Avant-garde, 1974

“This is not a time for political art, but politics as migrated into autonomous art, and nowhere more so than where it seems to be politically dead.”

Th. Adorno, Aesthetics and Politics, (1962) 1977

¹ This title paraphrases James Elkins' study on *The Strange Place of Religion on Contemporary Art* (New York: Routledge, 2004). In Elkins own words, “this book is a speculative attempt to describe why serious religious art that represents major religions is largely excluded from the art world. Why do the major venues of international art, and the principal journals and historians, consider only work that is ambiguous, ironic, or critical in relation to the major religions?” (see <http://saic.academia.edu/JElkins/Books>)

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SUMMARY

This article is part of the idea, widely disseminated, that the concept of public art radically challenges the concepts of autonomous work of art. Then considers more specifically, the strangeness that notion, that the Public Art is not a territory at the disposal of free artistic creation, on the contrary, it has to be adapted to the complex and demanding of public space, generates in field of contemporary art theory, even in the minds of critics who, as Rosalind Krauss, fought the essentialist roots of autonomy envisaged by modernism and supported the artists in front "of anti-aesthetic"³.

RESUMEN

Este artículo parte de la idea, ampliamente difundida, de que el concepto de arte público desafía radicalmente los conceptos de obra de arte autónoma. Luego considera más específicamente, la extrañeza que la noción, que el arte público no es un territorio a disposición de la creación artística libre, por el contrario, tiene que adaptarse a las complejas y exigentes demandas del espacio público, genera en campo de la teoría del arte contemporáneo, incluso en las mentes de los críticos que, como Rosalind Krauss, que combate las raíces esencialistas de la autonomía predicada por el modernismo y con el apoyo de los artistas frente a la "anti-estética"

³ For an extensive analysis on the implications and developments of this debate see A. Remesar, *Para una Teoría del Arte Público: Proyectos y Lenguajes Escultóricos*. – Barcelona: UB, 1997 (Memoria para el concurso de cátedra). A. Remesar asserts: "*To maintain an idea of public art as art for/in public spaces allows this paradigmatic situation [...] where the artist acts as a demiurge [...] to endure. It allows us to conceive public space as merely one of the available spheres of action in contemporary art, leaving unattended the necessary adjustments of this filed to a broader context, one that is not solely dependent on art world's proxys.*" (p. 19).

RESUMO

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This paper carries on the widely known assertion that Public Art challenges the main assumptions of contemporary art theory because it, dramatically challenges the autonomic conception of creative work. I am specifically reporting myself to the idea that public art cannot be merely thought as yet another available ground for contemporary art. That, on the contrary, public art has to adapt itself to the complex and demanding context of the public space, where artists should never be allowed to freely play their creative will

Despite the efforts of the “*anti-aesthetic*” forefront of the 1960’s and 1970’s and of the critics that first supported them (identified with the circle of historians and critics joined around the *October* journal) in the early 1980’s, or those undertaken by sociologists in order to show its presumed deceptiveness (Bourdieu’s work being the major

reference⁴), or even the putative successful developments of “*relational aesthetics*” (vide the recent exhibition held at MACBA), the aesthetic principle of autonomy has not been truly overcome. In fact it underwrites core art theory thinking, clarifying for instance the terms of the pervasive sense of reductionism attributed to sociological approaches such as Bourdieu’s.

As is well known, the notion of art’s autonomy was at the very heart of the project of Modernity. Referencing M. Weber’s work, J. Habermas calls our attention to the fact that the philosophers of the Enlightenment joined “*their efforts to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art according to their inner logic*”⁵. The construction of an autonomous sphere of art was then achieved, after a long and demanding struggle, and would be reinforced in subsequent decades. *Beaux Art Academies* had a definitive institutional role to play throughout the 18th, and 19th centuries in this matter. Another major part of the credits is due to the Modern aesthetic legacy (Kant in particular) and 19th century’s sophisticated defense of *l’art pour l’art*⁶.

⁴ See as an example P. Bourdieu, *Les regles de l’art*. – Paris: Seuil, 1992.

⁵ “Modernity – An Incomplete Project”, *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (ed. Hal Foster). – Seattle: Bay Press, 1993 [1983], p.9

⁶ As Habermas puts it: “ By the time of Baudelaire, who repeated this *promesse de bonheur* via art, the utopia of reconciliation with society had gone sour. A relation of opposites had come into being; art had become a critical mirror, showing the irreconcilable nature of aesthetic and social

I will not go back to observe the basis of German idealism, I promise (I am not a philosopher; just an art historian who believes that we cannot think about practice without theory). Nor will I examine Bourdieu's sociological critique or the foundations of relational aesthetics. Instead, I want to consider the abiding validation of an autonomous sphere of art in late 20th century art theory and criticism, a validation underwrote by those who were in fact committed with artistic practices engaged with breaking up modernism's hideous *ivory tower*⁷. This unexpected contradiction is very much embedded in the highly influential discourse of the "October" forefront. The urge of surpassing the idealist conception of art associated with Clement Greenberg's criticism put the aesthetic discourse of autonomy into to question and worked to deny "the idea of a privileged aesthetic realm". As Hal Foster also puts it in his famous

worlds. This modernist transformation was all the more painfully realized, the more art alienated itself from life and withdrew into the untouchableness of complete autonomy. Out of such emotional currents finally gathered those explosive energies which unloaded in the surrealist attempt to blow up the autarkical sphere of art and to force a reconciliation of art and life" (idem: 10).

⁷ An ivory tower epitomized in statements like: "(...) modernism has dispensed not only with historical narratives, but with all narrative, to achieve the stunning simultaneity of the experience of the work itself, the picture as pure aesthetic object"; R. Krauss, "Richard Serra: Sculpture", *Richard Serra* (ed. Hal Foster with Gordon Hughes). – Massachusetts: MIT, 2000, p. 101.

introduction to the *Anti-aesthetic...*⁸, insisting on the reconsideration of “*the very notion of the aesthetic*” meant to withdraw the belief “*that aesthetic experience exists apart, without ‘purpose’, all but beyond history*”. In other words, the anti-aesthetics discharge of notions as *disinterested interest* and *purposeless purpose* responded to the urge of overcoming an essentialist notion of the aesthetic, one that had set its foundations on Greenberg’s particular (mis)interpretation of Kant’s thought.⁹ This rightful debate did not however prompt a radical leap outside the world of aesthetic. I reckon it could not do so, for a successful overcoming of the autonomous force of aesthetic would seriously endanger – this being no doubt the core issue – the required basis of artistic resistance.¹⁰

⁸ All quotations from Hal Foster, “Postmodernism: A Preface”, *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (ed. Hal Foster). – Seattle: Bay Press, 1993 [1983], p. xv

⁹ Following D. Costello’s analysis on this matter one becomes aware that Greenberg’s claim that Kant was the first real modernist (in *Modernist Painting*, 1960) was based on the misleading reading of his third *Critique*. Firstly, Greenberg attempts to apply Kant’s account of pure (or disinterested) aesthetic judgment, a judgment about the aesthetic feeling aroused by “free” (or conceptually unconstrained) beauty, to works of art without taking into consideration that this account takes natural beauty and decorative motives (their “purposeless purpose”) as its paradigm. Secondly, and perhaps with more decisive results, Greenberg “tends to empiricize and psychologize Kant’s theory of aesthetic judgment. See D. Costello,

¹⁰ Hal Foster contrasts a postmodernism of reaction from a postmodernism of resistance; see “Postmodernism: A Preface”, *The Anti-*

J. Habermas sets the terms of this danger while criticizing the radical attempt to negate art underpinned by Surrealists. He therefore calls our attention to the fact that the efforts of the avant-garde “*ended up ironically by giving due exactly to these categories through which Enlightenment aesthetics had circumscribe its object domain*”. Habermas writes, moreover “*when the containers of an autonomously developed cultural sphere are shattered, the contents get dispersed. Nothing remains from a desublimated meaning or a deconstructed form; an emancipatory effect does not follow*”.

We are thus facing the riddle thoroughly analyzed in Peter Bürger’s famous essay *Theory of the Avant-garde* (1st published in 1974). In the context of the bourgeois society, autonomy of art has permitted the description of art’s detachment from the context of practical life as a *natural* historical development. Precisely here, says Bürger, lies its untruth because the appearance of this category as naturalized history conceals its historical construction and social conditioning. So the author concludes: “*The category of ‘autonomy’ does not permit the understanding of its referent as one that developed historically. The relative dissociation of the work of art from the praxis of life in bourgeois society thus becomes transformed into the (erroneous) idea that the work of art is totally independent*

*of society. In the strict meaning of the term, 'autonomy' is thus an ideological [in classical Marxist terms] category that joints an element of truth (the apartness of art from the praxis of life) and an element of untruth (the hypostatization of this fact, which is a result of historical development as the 'essence' of art)."*¹¹

Reviewing the avant-garde's first attempts to overturn the autonomy of art, Bürguer summons back Herbert Marcuse's remarks on how in the bourgeois society "*all those needs that cannot be satisfied in everyday life (...) can find a home in art, because art is removed from the praxis of life. Values such as humanity, joy, truth, solidarity are extruded from life as it were, and preserved in art.*"¹² As a result, art has a contradictory role. In the one hand "*it projects the image of a better order and to that extent protests against the bad order that prevails.*" Yet in realizing a fictive image of a better order "*it relieves the existing society of the pressure of those forces that make for change. They are assigned to confinement in an ideal sphere.*"¹³

Avant-garde's attempts to reinstate art into life, on the other hand, offer a reverse effect: "*For the (relative) freedom of art vis-à-vis the praxis of life is at the same time*

¹¹ Peter Bürguer, *Theory of the Avant-garde* – English translation in *Art in Modern Culture: an Anthology of Critical Texts* (ed. F. Frascina and J. Harris). – London: Phaidon, 1992, p. 56-57.

¹² Idem, p. 59

¹³ Idem.

the condition that must be fulfilled if there is to be a critical cognition of reality. An art no longer distinct from the praxis of life but wholly absorbed in it will loose the capacity to criticize it, along with its distance.”¹⁴

In other words, (relative) autonomy is the condition for critical art, for an art of resistance.¹⁵

I will insist on this riddle around the concept of autonomy, as I will insist that conceiving art as an autonomous sphere is an idea that was not overturned by late 20th century art theory, even though what is meant by autonomy has changed and is now striving against its idealist, or essentialist foundations in favor of an awareness on the historical construction of the concept.

Moreover, I will maintain that for that reason we face a giant gap between art theory and those art practices that do not fit into the vindications of autonomy. (Needless to say that, in Adorno’s negative aesthetics, this would be nothing but the gap between art and cultural industry, or, in other

¹⁴ Idem, p. 60

¹⁵ This seems to be implicit even in the thorough critique Hal Foster directs to Bürguer’s *Theory of the Avant-garde*. At least it is not affected by the argument that “Bürguer takes the romantic rhetoric of the avant-garde, of rupture and revolution, at its own word. In so doing he misses crucial dimentions of its practice. For example, he misses its *mimetic* dimension, whereby the avant-garde mimes the degraded world of capitalist modernity in order not to embrace it but to mock it (as in Cologne dada). He also misses its *utopian* dimention, whereby the avant-garde proposes not what can be so much as what *cannot* be – again as a critique of what is (as in the Stijl)” (H. Foster, *The Return of the Real*. - Massachusetts: MIT, 1996, pp. 15-16)

words, between art and non-art).

Public art is a particularly suited field to look into if one has this gap in mind. For the sake of this account I will briefly focus my attention in two major references of almost every theoretical account on this domain: (1) Rosalind Krauss' extraordinary writings on modern sculpture and her concept of a postmodernist "expanded field"¹⁶ and (2) the *Tilted Arc* episode (by episode I mean both the official decision of taking the piece apart and the terms of Richard Serra's defence). These widely known references will, I hope, help me strengthen my argument on the grounds of the strange place of Public Art in contemporary art theory.

On the expanded field of sculpture

As is well known Krauss' point on this essay cannot be understood without acknowledging her opposition to Greenberg's paramount theory of Modernism. It has been keenly pointed out that her initial assertions on the overcoming of the monumental logic by modernist sculpture are closely connected to Greenberg's perspective¹⁷. But her discourse strives to dismantle all Greenberg's basic *a priori*

¹⁶ Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in an expanded field", *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (ed. Hal Foster). – Seattle: Bay Press, 1993 [1983], pp. 31-42.

¹⁷ See A. Remesar, *Para una Teoría del Arte Público: Proyectos y Lenguajes Escultóricos*. – Barcelona: UB, 1997 (Memoria para el concurso de catedra), pp. 158-164.

assumptions: both his historicist and deterministic notion of History, and his essentialist conception of Modernism.

Krauss' expanded field concept allows her to show that "*within the situation of postmodernism, practice is not defined in relation to a given medium – sculpture – but rather in relation to the logical operations on a set of cultural terms, for which any medium – photography, books, lines on walls, mirrors, or sculpture itself – might be used*" (p.41).

Thus "*the logic of the space of postmodernist practice is no longer organized around the definition of a given medium on the grounds of its material, or, for that matter, the perception of material. It is organized instead through the universe of terms that are felt to be in opposition within a cultural situation*" (in the sense of Saussure's definition of language as a system of oppositions). Krauss insists: "*It follows, then, that within any of the positions generated by the given logical space, many different mediums might be employed*".

Medium-specificity was the core assumption of Greenberg's theory of modernism. Artistic value granted to modernist practice was dependent on an *auto-referenced* investigation, which means he identified medium-specificity with the pursue of aesthetic value in art.¹⁸

In supporting the artistic value of *post-medium*

¹⁸ Cf. Idem, p. 3

sculpture through a structural analysis of its expanded field Krauss radically challenges Greenberg's essentialist concept of modernism¹⁹, as well as Michael Fried's theoretical unfolding of its premises.²⁰ She successfully denounces the reductionism of medium-specificity as the essential inner logic of grand art's narrative. Nevertheless, her "*anti-aesthetic postmodernism*" while taking a crucial stand against idealist conceptions and the parochial definition of artistic disciplines does not refuse the idea of art being an (at least relatively) autonomous sphere. If she did so, she would jeopardize art's critical power.

Accordingly, Krauss' appraisal of Serra's phenomenological turn – of his sculptural elaboration of the perceptual field she writes – acknowledges his successful opposition to the presumption that art is about symbolic totalities defined between the walls of enclosed disciplines. In Serra's case, site-specificity is part of the expanded field of sculpture. Following Krauss' writing, site-specificity in works such as the *Tilted Arc* is taken to be "*not the subject of the work but – in its articulation of the movement of the viewer's body-in-destination – it's a medium*".²¹ Yet this

¹⁹ For a critical perspective on the success of Krauss's response to Greenberg see D. Costello (idem)

²⁰ Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood" (1967), *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (ed. G. Battcock). – New York: Dutton, 1968

²¹ R. Krauss, "Richard Serra: Sculpture", *Richard Serra* (ed. Hal Foster with Gordon Hughes). – Massachusetts: MIT, 2000, (October Files) p. 140.

does not affect the assumption that Serra creates a unique experience, one that frees sculpture from the commoditized world of everyday life on no other basis than its autonomous condition. I mean sculpture's critical force, its ability to resist.

On the (invisible) critical power of site-specificity

Site-specificity is therefore a core argument in “*anti-aesthetic*” approaches to Serra's work. As Krauss clearly states by taking site-specificity as its medium, Serra's sculpture moves in on a theoretical dimension also acknowledged by every other contributors of the *October Files* book on Serra.²² The crucial value of this assertion is thus anticipated by the announcement of the expanded field of sculpture as breaking away with an idealist concept of sculpture. Yve-Alain Bois' sharp synthesis of this question begins by recalling the impact of Fried's vehement attack on minimalism²³, and states “all Serra's work is an implicit reply to Michael Fried's text”, meaning that his phenomenological conception of sculpture is in a deliberate opposition to the “*essential goal of modernist art, and of sculpture in particular*”, i.e. to affirm through medium-

²² *Richard Serra* (ed. Hal Foster with Gordon Hughes). – Massachusetts: MIT, 2000 (October Files)

²³ Published as “Art and Objecthood” (1967); see above note 19.

specificity “its autonomy in relation to (...) real space”.²⁴

It is against this fallacious idealist conception that Serra operates and sophisticatedly reinforces the ground of his work, specially the ground of his public sculpture. Unavailable to accept art as an enclosed totality validated by its inner formal properties, Serra affirms during the *Tilted Arc* crisis: “*to remove the work is to destroy the work*”.²⁵ It is strictly against medium-specificity theoretical settings that Serra’s site-specificity is thus elaborated (I cannot help to find the presence of the term specificity in both expressions a bit disturbing though).

My question here does not work to assess the paucity of aestheticized (idealist) notions of site-specificity but to argue that taking site-specificity as a sculptural medium, even if informed by rigorous phenomenological awareness, is to reclaim an autonomous status to sculpture by way of at least two presuppositions:

1) Even though we must now consider that the “*coordinates of perception were established as existing not only between the spectator and the work but among*

²⁴ Yve-Alain Bois, “A Picturesque Stroll around *Clara-Clara*”, *Richard Serra* (ed. Hal Foster with Gordon Hughes). – Massachusetts: MIT, 2000 (October Files), p. 82

²⁵ This statement of R. Serra is repeatedly evoked in D. Crimp’s “Redefining Site Specificity”, *Richard Serra* (ed. Hal Foster with Gordon Hughes). – Massachusetts: MIT, 2000 (October Files), p.148, n.2

spectator, art work, and the place inhabited by both”²⁶, and that in belonging to its site the work loses its stability and can no longer be appreciated as a bounded totality, the presumption of a distinguishable domain of sculpture remains clearly untouched.²⁷ The idea that sculpture faces a set of specific (inner) critical questions is very much present in Serra’s own discourse regarding his work: namely his complete refusal to collaborate with architecture²⁸, and his

²⁶ Douglas Crimp, “Redefining Site Specificity”, *Richard Serra* (ed. Hal Foster with Gordon Hughes). – Massachusetts: MIT, 2000 (October Files), p. 151.

²⁷ Douglas Crimp considers this question and tries to distinguish the uncompleted attempt to overcome an idealist conception of sculpture made by minimalists from the radicalized site-specificity taken up in the work of artists such as Daniel Buren, Hans Haacke, Michael Asher, Lawrence Weiner, Robert Smithson, and of course Richard Serra. He also writes: “Their contribution to a materialist critique of art, their resistance to the ‘disintegration of culture into commodities’, were fragmentary and provisional, the consequences limited, systematically opposed or mystified, ultimately overturned. What remains of this critique today are a history of to be recovered and fitful marginalized practices that struggle to exist at all in an art world more dedicated than ever before to commodity value” (D. Crimp, “Redefining Site Specificity”, *Richard Serra* (ed. Hal Foster with Gordon Hughes). – Massachusetts: MIT, 2000 (October Files), p. 152.

²⁸ “There seems to be in this country [United States] right now, especially in sculpture, a tendency to make work which attends to architecture. I am not interested in work which is structurally ambiguous, or in sculpture which satisfies urban design principles. I have always found that to be not only an aspect of mannerism but a need to reinforce a status quo of existing aesthetics.

“I am interested in sculpture which is non-utilitarian, non-functional. . . any

conception of the public as a public for (his) sculpture.²⁹

2) Theoretical and critical discourse recognizes and praises Serra's right to disrupt the public space, because it firmly believes that the aesthetic significance of art arises from its inner critical power – i.e. what Kant considered its ability both to resist and denounce “*mechanical nature*” and to free itself from the “culture of disciplines”³⁰. Douglas Crimp's

use is a misuse.” (R. Serra, “Rigging,” interview with Gerard Hovagymyan, in Richard Serra: Interviews, Etc. 1970-1980 Yonkers, N.Y: Hudson River Museum, 1980), p.128

²⁹ Michael Kelly writes about *Tilted Arc*' site-specificity stating: “*Serra did not regard the public who experienced Tilted Arc as people who had legitimate, aesthetic and other claims on Federal Plaza. He was actually rather candid on this issue: ‘If you are conceiving a piece for a public place, a place and space that people walk through, one has to consider the traffic flow.’ So Serra thought of the ‘public’ as ‘traffic’, as anonymous people who were taken into consideration only insofar as they could be expected to have peripatetic perceptual experiences of his sculpture in a behavioral space of his design: ‘The work I make does not allow for experience outside the conventions of sculpture as sculpture.’ Tilted Arc was situated to encompass ‘the people who walk on the plaza as its volume ... to bring the viewer into the sculpture.’” (M. Kelly, “Public Art Controversy: The Serra and Lin Cases”, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 54, N. 1 (Winter, 1996), p. 17.*

³⁰ We unexpectedly rejoin Kant's aesthetic on account of Gregg Horowitz's assertion that the 3rd *Critique* attributes to art a perennial condition of resistance and hence announces modernism. We return to Kant but, of course, in a reading completely detached from Greenberg's

analysis is, from where I stand, very elucidating, specially when he writes: “*In reorienting the use of Federal Plaza from a place of traffic control to one of sculpture, Serra once again used sculpture to hold its site hostage, to insist upon the necessity for art to fulfil its own functions rather than those relegated to it by its governing institutions and discourses.*”³¹

I reckon that the main problem of this post-idealist critical conceptions of sculpture as an expanded field, and by extension those of art in the public space, is that the very notion of public, although not exclusively pondered on the basis of reception³², is still very much thought as relying on an a priori (and hierarchical) idea that art is about art – i.e. that it can only emerge within the bounded set of the critical questions that both problematize and reaffirm its autonomous condition and therefore set its ability to resist. That is why we should recall once more, now following Jacques Rancière, that the preservation “*of the autonomy of art from all forms of power and aestheticization*”, was never “*in order to preserve it for the pure enjoyment of art for its*

interpretation. See Gregg Horowitz, *Sustaining Loss: Art and Mournful Life*. – Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001. pp. 25-55.

³¹ Douglas Crimp, “Redefining Site Specificity”, *Richard Serra* (ed. Hal Foster with Gordon Hughes). – Massachusetts: MIT, 2000 (October Files), p.168

³² As in W. Benjamin optimiscal diagnosis on the critical reception of post-auratic autonomous art.

own sake but, on the contrary, as the inscription of the unresolved contradiction between the aesthetic promise and the realities of oppression in the world.”³³

Needless to say that we achieve a dead end, one that only art, public art I mean, has the means to overturn (answers never depend on theory, only diagnosis and questions do). Particularly at stake here is the ability of the participative forms of intervention in the public realm – those dependent not of an oppositional effect, but on social consensus – to outshine the pervasive disbelief on their aesthetical pregnancy.

One cannot but wait for public art’s power to overturn its alien place in art theory.

³³ Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and its discontents*. – Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009, p. 129