

# THE ART OF PUBLIC

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1<sup>st</sup> year AHK Kunsteducatie  
30<sup>th</sup> August 2016

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## Introduction

We can read recent history as a history of privatization, not just of the economy but also of society, as marketing and media push imagination more and more towards individual life and individual satisfaction. Citizens are redefined as consumers and public participation, where any control of collective or individual political power over our own lives, weakens. It is a continuous process, where the different parts of our life – politics, education, health care - are no longer our own responsibility and are not under our control. We are also often encouraged by the media and advertising to fear each other and regard public life as a danger; to live in secured spaces, communicate by electronic means and acquire our information from media rather than each other (Solnit, 2010). The problem of separating the public and private sphere appeared in previous eras as well. In 1843, Marx wrote that the splitting of man into public and private has the effect of dividing and debilitating both individual and communal existence by turning them against each other, when they can only exist through their collaboration (Ball & Farr, 1984).

Another important area where the polarity between public and private is in crisis is public space, as a result of its growing commercialization and privatization. Tonnellat (2010) points out the importance of the public sphere that is physically accessible to everyone, but also able to support the sense of a shared community, locality through its usage and the conversations and interactions that can happen there. According to him, the shrinkage of these kinds of publicly accessible spaces, threatens the diversity of what public spaces are meant to offer and therefore changes the role we as citizens are meant to have.

Nevertheless there is a growing desire today to create new visions about what our society could become in the future. These visions often recall the basic constitution of democracy - the people's power - asking people to return to the public and collective life. Solnit (2010) calls this vision a disaster utopia, where the old order no longer exists and the struggle is about whether it will be reimposed, or a new form, perhaps one that is less authoritarian and fearful, and more collaborative and local, can arise.

I was born in Hungary and grew up in a society in which public participation was not part of my education, neither from my parents nor my school. I was never encouraged to see my streets, neighbourhood, city or country, as things I was responsible for or could influence. I now recognize this as a dominant attitude among the majority of mainstream Western society. For example according to the International Labour Organisation, 170 million children are engaged in child labour, with many making textiles to satisfy the demand of consumers in Europe, the US, and beyond (2016). This is a fact known to a wider public, still a few believes that by consuming from secure sources or second hand can make a change. I see a danger in the growing distance from public participation, because issues which affect us directly are no longer under our control.

Over the past four years, I have been creating site specific projects based on the social/urban tensions and (im)possibilities that public places offer. My personal motivation was the above mentioned urgency to create situations which provoke public participation and reflection. However, in working in public space I was confronted with a much more complex notion of what it means to work in public. As I slowly positioned myself within, I began to question the role of the public sphere today and what it means to participate. Where is the truly public space? Does public art, which is so deeply influenced by

contemporary urban theories, have an influence on the development of the public sphere? What is their connection to each other?

Along with establishing a position in relation to the questions listed above, the purpose of my review is to contribute to the growing discussion on the relationship between public art and the public sphere. Given the limits of this paper, I will focus my attention on art works that address the site and the public as social rather than formal. These artistic practices are less concerned with a relational aesthetic than with the collaborative activity resulting from working with existing communities or establishing new ones (Bishop, 2005). Therefore, and yet in asserting their significance here, this paper seeks to better understand the following:

## **Research question**

How does socially engaged public art contribute to the public sphere?

## **Sub-questions**

1. How did socially engaged public art develop?
2. How did the public sphere develop?
3. What are the different categories of socially engaged public art?

To be able to fully acquire the meaning of both concepts - socially engaged public art and the public sphere – the first part of my review aims to give a historical and ideological analysis of both concepts, exploring key turning points in their developments. The second part intends to describe some of the major characteristics of socially engaged public art through specific examples.

The original concept of the public sphere was tied to the social and economic conditions of 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe. However, much of the writing on socially engaged public art is based on the history and culture of the United States. Nevertheless, they both represent a Westernized view of culture and the public sphere and share much in common. To begin with, I propose in the first chapter, to clarify the specific use of words in the two main concepts.

## 1. Key definitions

### Public space vs public sphere

"public sphere is a theatre in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk". (Fraser, 1990, p.56)

In urban planning the concept of public space is founded on two central objects: public space, as a physical location and public sphere, understood as the concept of the conversation (Tonnelat, 2010). Researchers generally refer to the first as "public space" and may look to subjects such as street culture, playing fields, and architecture, and the second as the "public sphere", where they are interested in questions of democracy, civil society and public opinion (Aubin, 2014).

For Sassen (2006) the difference between public space and public sphere lies in the "making". She poses the question: what about the actual "making" of the public space? She sees the public sphere as being constructed through the practices and the subjectivities of people, which can propose new questions about our contemporary urban, social and political conditions.

The concept was first initiated by Jurgen Habermas in 1962. He describes it as an imaginary community that does not necessarily exist in an identifiable space. In its ideal form is a gathering of private people as a public who then together articulate the needs of society (Fraser, 1990).

### Socially engaged public art

For the past three decades, artists of varying backgrounds have been working in a manner that resembles political and social activity. Although they are dealing with some of the most serious issues of our time – waste, homelessness, violence, cultural identity - the sources of these artworks are not exclusively political, but rather an internal necessity from the artist to engage with his or her audience. These works are process-based, often activist in nature and related to local rather than global narratives (Lacy, 1995). They are also mostly managed by artists rather than agents, institutions or curators and have a relatively weak profile in the commercial art world. They do not hang on the museum walls, as they are less likely to be objects, but rather social events, workshops, performances and collective projects (Bishop, 2005).

There are a variety of terms currently used to refer to this field: socially engaged art, community based art, dialogic art, new genre public art, participatory or collaborative art. Bishop (2012) refers to them strictly as participatory art, because of the involvement of many people and to avoid the ambiguities of social engagement, which according to her, refer to a much wider range of works. Another often-confusing name, is public art, a term used by some artists since these works often act physically in public space or engage with issues concerning the public sphere. Nevertheless this name can be confusing, since conventional public art tends to be defined by its relation as aesthetic object to a physical site, in contrast to the emerging practices of public art in the 1990s which included social interaction (Miles, 1997). In this paper I decided to refer to it as socially engaged public art, because I am interested in its engagement to the social and the public, both understood as people and space.

## 2. How did socially engaged public art develop?



*Francis Alys, "When Faith Moves Mountains", Peru, Lima - 2002,  
Photograph courtesy of Galerie Peter Kilchmann, Zurich  
Image: Francis Alys*

Francis Alys provided shovels to 500 volunteers to displace a nearly 500-meter sand dune a few inches (*When faith moves mountains*, 2002). The group BijaRi let a chicken run loose in two Sao Paulo shopping districts and filmed the public reactions (*Chicken projects 1,2*, 2001/2003). Christoph Schlingensiefel locked 12 refugees in a shipping container for a week for outside viewers to vote for their least favourite (*People leave Austria*, 2000). These examples demonstrate the growing artistic interest in political participation, collaboration and urban practices that have been taking place since the early 1990s. Their development can be told from a more formal direction – Art in Public Place - built on typology of materials, spaces and artistic media, or an ideological direction – Art in Public Interest - not so easily classifiable within a discourse dominated by objects, but instead centred on political intention, communication and participation (Lacy, 1995).

### **Art in Public Place**

The term public art first emerged in the United States, initiated by the National Endowment for the Arts. The idea of these laws was to set aside one percent of the construction costs of public buildings in a separate budget line, called art allocation. The mission of these projects was twofold: to give the public access to the best art of our time outside museum walls and to salvage the increasingly bleak urban

environment (Finkelpearl, 2001). To some extent, there was a hope that art could revive an old idea of the city, where artists were regularly included in architecture. In fact this urban redevelopment, in which artists are brought to change the perception of a neighbourhood, is still a primary motivation in many public art programs, also referred to as gentrification (Miles, 1997).

Picasso, Calder or Moore, who were called upon to create symbols of a new urban identity, were good Modernists and operated under the assumption of an artwork's autonomy. Calder, for example, never saw nor felt it necessary to visit the plaza before the sculpture's installation. Public art at that time simply meant placing large-scale work in open plazas. (Finkelpearl, 2001). Nevertheless, throughout the 1970s administrators and art activists lobbied for more money for art programs which fuelled public art. New types of artists appeared, who introduced a difference between "public art", a sculpture in a public space, and "art in public spaces", which integrated art into the site, also known site-specific art (Lacy, 1995).

In the 1980s, the economic downturn deepened urban troubles, and a new distrust of art led to attacks on public art and its funding sources. One of the biggest controversies was Richard Serra's Tilted Arc, a 3,5 meter high and 36,5 meter long wall of steel, installed outside in Federal Plaza, New York, in 1981. The sculpture had to be removed 8 years later, on the demand of office workers who found it extremely disruptive to their daily routines. This particular case prompted debates about the role of government funding, the role of the public in determining the value of a work of art, and it called for greater public accountability by the artists (Finkelpearl, 2001).

## **Art in the Public Interest**

An alternative history of today's public art could be read with the conceptual artists of the 1960s and 1970s who wanted to remove art from the commodification of the gallery and museum and return it to the space of the everyday. They began to use technologies that hadn't been used consciously before: behaviour, the weather, ecology or waste material. This period was also known as popular culture, a culture based on the tastes of ordinary people rather than an educated elite (Lacy, 1995).

Much of this art also had a political agenda, concerned with making visible the voices of marginalized groups. This includes AIDS activism, the women's movement, the anti-Apartheid movement, the Civil Rights movement, and the Algerian wars, among others (Thompson, 2012). Lacy (1995) traces the connection between this activist view of culture and socially engaged art in the U.S. to the Vietnam War protests, which hugely influenced the art and the artists. According to Bishop (2012), the social turn in Western European contemporary art starts around the fall of communism in 1989. She emphasises the word "contemporary" because for her it is only the resurgence of the utopian rethinking of art's social and political potential. She anticipates the emergence of what she calls participatory art, from Italian Futurism (1910) and the Dada season (1921).

## **Participation**

When examining artists' motivations today for turning to social participation, we often come across the claim that our society became numb and fragmented by Capitalism's repressive nature. Artists are no longer interested in a passive process of presenter/spectator because communication has been almost entirely appropriated by the commercial world in which one can receive an aesthetic experience on

every corner. Therefore participation became an important slogan of modern society, with the belief that it re-humanizes our society (Bishop, 2012).

The importance of detaching our thinking from the “passivity” is also not new. For art critic Gablik (1991), the outcome of the dominant Western way of thinking was so threatening, that she envisioned a new model based on the idea of participation for the artist. Hlavajova (2015) supports this thought by saying, today it is not enough anymore to represent problems from a distance. We must replace critique with a proposition. She believes that artists loose their traditional role in which they see society as a whole from an external position. However with this change they are granted to experience complicity and solidarity with all members of society.

Bourriaud's book *Relational Aesthetics* is noted as an important turning point in the “legitimizing” process of arts orientation towards social context. He gave the first ever description of art practices that are inspired by human relations and their social context. Up until the early 1990s, socially engaged art was confined to the periphery of the art world. Today it is near a global phenomenon (Bishop, 2012).

## **Conclusion**

To thoroughly investigate the possible functions of socially engaged public art, this chapter described the most important turning points in its history. The formal analysis - *Art in Public Place* – begins with commissions and distribution of arts funding in the 1960s in the United States. Public art at that time meant sculptures placed in public spaces as a display to a wider audience and to draw people back to parts of the city that were not so popular. By the 1980s, most of these works shift from the definition public art to art in public spaces that integrated art into the site, also known site specific art. (Finkelpearl 2001, Lacy 1995, Miles, 1997)

The ideological interpretation – *Art in the Public Interest* - dates public arts history from the increase of conceptual artists of 1960s and 1970s. These artists turned away from the commodification of the gallery and returned to the space of the everyday, which was hugely influenced by political activism at that time; in the U.S. it was the Vietnam war (1955-1975) and in Europe it was the fall of communism (1989). As capitalism becomes a ruling social and economical system of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, media and the commercial world gains a lot of power, appropriating almost entirely all means of communication, claiming to make society a passive observer. Hence, participation becomes an important slogan of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Artists believe that it is no longer enough to merely observe from an external position and represent, but that it is necessary to engage. (Thompson, 2012, Bishop, 2012, Hlavajova, 2015, Gablik, 1991).

### 3. How did the public sphere develop?



*John Webster entertaining the crowd in 1973, Sydney*

*Image credit: John Carnemolla*

In 1962 Habermas gives a historical and sociological account of the creation, development and demise of, what he calls the bourgeois public sphere. With this work, he was among the first to point out the intimate connection between the existence of the public sphere, in which public opinion can only be formed if a public that engages in rational discussion exists, and the foundations of democratic society. It is not so much of an actual place like a market, a coffeehouse or a salon. The German word "Öffentlichkeit" can be translated as publicity, public sphere or public. Although many translators and scholars make this "öffentlichkeit" appear as a place or a concrete thing, Habermas refers to a more abstract quality that exists in conversation and discourse (Boeder, 2005).

#### **The invention of public**

The modern concept of public is associated with the rise of the middle class who were struggling for political representation in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century of Europe. It is first articulated in the work of Enlightenment thinkers such as Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau. At 1650, Hobbes described a covenant in which he insisted that conflict in society could only be overcome through an agreement, where individuals sacrifice their autonomy and let themselves to be ruled by a power that guarantees a collective peace. This power must always be based on the will of the people themselves (Kester, 2011).

The first places where the concept of the new public emerged physically were the salons, coffee shops and public art exhibitions of France, Britain or Germany, where various people could gather and discuss matters freely. For example, the coffee houses in London at this time became centres of art and literary

criticism, which gradually began to widen to include economic and political disputes as matters of discussion. This rational-critical political debate formed a new phenomenon called public opinion, in which the bourgeoisie learned to critically reflect upon itself and its role in society (SparkNotes Editors, 2016).

The three most important features are:

- Disregard of status: separation from the power of both the church and the government.
- Domain of common concern: discourses should be restricted only by common goods.
- Inclusivity: the discussions should be open and accessible to all.

## **Critical thinking**

Habermas was a student at the Frankfurt school, where critical theory, as a new interdisciplinary way of thinking at the time, had begun to develop. He believed that the quality of society depends on our capacity to communicate and debate (Boeder, 2005). With the reinforcement of the 18<sup>th</sup> century salons, the exhibiting of art became very important. Works of art which had previously been presented in churches for example, had to be received with admiration, in contrast to arts entering the new free and open public forum, which allowed a space for autonomous judgement (Kester, 2011). People became able to express their opinion about art for the first time. Crow describes the salons of the early 17<sup>th</sup> century as places where visitors could discuss and form their singular and equally valid opinion. "Long before liberalism could be tried out in the larger arena of political life, the exhibition space provided a kind of temporary model in microcosm" (Crow, 1985, p.11). The public sphere was believed to prepare people for political reflection by giving them the chance to critically discuss art and literature (SparkNotes Editors, 2016).

## **Habermas' own critique**

The full utopian potential of the bourgeois public sphere was never realised in practice. The main reason, according to Habermas, is the emergence of a new sort of influence; media power, dominated by large corporations. Media's role in the public debate has shifted from the dissemination of reliable information to the formation of public opinion. It invaded the process of public opinion by systematically creating news events that attract attention and make a "like society" where we only get offered what we like - Facebook - . Thus, the public ceases to have an active engagement in public debate and instead becomes a passive audience (Harrington, 2007).

## **Critique of others**

Some scholars contend that Habermas' account idealizes the public sphere. They argue that despite the accessibility it required in theory, the official public sphere was undoubtedly constituted by a number of significant exclusions. He neglected for example, the importance of gender, racialised ethnicities and women (SparkNotes Editors, 2016). In another critique, Fraser (1990) claims that marginalized groups formed their own public spheres, as opposed to Habermas' singular bourgeois public sphere. She argues that stratified societies - societies whose basic institutional framework generates unequal social groups - create parallel discursive areas, in which due to the ongoing debate, the participatory parity - participation in all spheres of life - is supported better than in a single, comprehensive public. Furthermore she disagrees with the prohibition of private interest from the discussion. She points out that "there are no naturally given, a priori boundaries" (p.76) between matters that are generally conceived as private, and ones we typically label as public. As an interesting example, she refers to the

shift in the general conception of domestic violence, from previously being a matter of private concern, to now generally being accepted as a common one.

### **The public sphere of today and the future**

Today's public sphere is going through significant changes. Van Dijk (2012) distinguishes three conditions that are transforming and as well being likely to disappear; the alliance of the public sphere with a particular place or territory, the distinction between public and private and the conventional notion of a single, unified sphere in favour of a more segmented, pluralist model. One of the reasons for this transformation is to be found with the rise of new network structures, like the Internet such as Facebook, Twitter, Google+, Instagram, Snapchat, Grindr, Tinder with "like" buttons, "tweet" buttons, and/or "share" buttons of some kind. It is in one hand feared to make the public feel involved without really participating (Fernback, Thompson 1995) and on the other hand supported as a unique and global channel for publishing and communication, which is fundamental to democracy (Rheingold, 2000).

### **Our urban future, a new urban discourse**

Despite the fact that the actual physical space was never important for Habermas and it might also likely disappear according to Van Dijk, the criticism of urban development is still a crucial element within the fields of architecture and urbanism, when it comes to the concept of the public sphere (Sassen, 2006). The general opinion is that public space is an essential element to the sustainability of cities for political, social and economic reasons. Alongside the television and the Internet, public space is where society is confronted with its diversity (Tonnelat, 2010). However there is a growing tendency in European cities to honour privatization at the expense of the public realm. This privatization threatens the above mentioned diversity. There are of course many responses in relation to this, mainly coming from critical urban theories. One of the most known one comes from Lefebvre (1968), called Right to the city. According to him, it is more than just improving people's neighbourhoods. It is about the democratic control over the usage of the city, with an elementary right to access, engage and use urban space as a public sphere, including the marginalized groups forced to live in residential ghettos around the perimeter of the city (Plyushteva, 2009).

"The right to the city.... is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right. The freedom to make and remake ourselves and our cities is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights."  
(Harvey, 2008, p.23)

Good public spaces, beside serving traditional roles - a place to meet, to make transactions and to move from A to B - are also characterised by the presence of people remaining when they have no pressing reason remain there (Gehl, 2007). These "personalizable" public spaces are also important for what Tonnelat (2010) calls the "environment for social learning", a skill that individuals learn in the most diverse spaces of the city and which helps them to get along. According to Sassen (2006), for those who lack power, who are disadvantaged, outsiders, minorities, the public space is also a place to gain presence in relation to power and in relation to each other. For her, the making of art is part of this work, whether public performances, installations, public sculptures or site- specific/community-based art.

## Conclusion

The concept of public sphere grew out of the social and economical conditions of 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe. It was meant to be independent from any state power and accessible to all to engage in a critical discussion about public concerns. This was later believed to form public opinion. Art played an important part because it gave the space for autonomous judgement through aesthetic observation. With this work, Habermas was one of the first who made a connection between the public sphere and democratic society. Critics attacked his concept on many levels; it was never accessible, because women and racial ethnic groups were always excluded, it was never singular, because marginal groups formed their own public sphere, creating multiple ones, and it should never only be about public concerns, because private issues can be conceived as public. (Boeder 2005, SparkNotes Editors, 2016, Fraser, 1990)

Today's public sphere is radically changing. The actual place, the distinction between public and private and the conventional notion of a single sphere is slowly disappearing. One of the reasons for this is the emergence of mass media that is feared to make the public feel involved without really participating at the same time it supports the creation of a new global platform for publishing and communication. Although the actual public space was never that important and is also likely to disappear, it is still a relevant concern for many urbanists, as well as for citizens. It is believed to be one of the only places that is truly accessible to all and has the most diversity. The Right to the city is just one response of many made in relation to this. It is the elementary right of democratic control over the usage of the city. Public spaces are also important spaces for the "environment for social learning"; a skill that individuals learn in the most diverse spaces of the city and which helps them to get along. (Van Dijk. 2012, Plyushteva, 2009, Tonnelat, 2010, Sassen, 2006)

## 4. What are the different categories of socially engaged public art?

It is quite a task to explain the different categories in socially engaged public art, because they correspond to different sectors of our life. For example Thompson (2012), opens his book, a conversation about socially engaged art, with the example of Women on Waves, an activist/art organization, which sails on a boat from the coasts of countries where abortion is illegal and provides these services to women there. This example immediately demonstrates the complexity existing in this particular field. In this case, one could ask what a floating hospital has to do with art. In fact, the boat has done relatively few abortions over the course of seven years. It has instead brought much attention through the media, creating worldwide awareness about this issue. This makes its gesture far more symbolic than practical and this is where Thompson would argue, whether this project belongs to socially engaged art. He argues that socially engaged artworks are poetic, yet political. They engage people and confront specific issues. However he admits, they are far removed from what one might call the traditional studio arts. Therefore to him, it is not an art movement, but instead a complex cultural production, indicating a new social order, functioning as a bridge between disciplines from urban planning to community work.

This is exactly what Bishop (2012) is so critical of—whether these works are in fact art. She argues that the social turn in contemporary art also stimulated an ethical turn in its criticism, in which the conversation has shifted away from the arts' typical lens of analysis (aesthetics) to the degree to which they supply good or bad models of collaboration and impact. For example, if a project is about hunger,

the ethical standard by which it is judged is how many it feeds rather than the questions it raises about feeding. She stresses that if we stop discussing, analyzing, and comparing such works critically as art, the governments will prioritize social effect over considerations of artistic quality. She fears, that by asking what the arts can do for the society, it will include anything – increasing employability, minimizing crime, fostering aspiration – except for artistic experimentation and research. Therefore it will move within a political logic in which audience figures and marketing statistics became essential to securing public funding. This is particularly present in Europe, where artists have access to public funding.

## Mapping the field

Different art critics and scholars have different ways to classify socially engaged art. Finkelpearl (2001) for example introduces three categories: Public art as architecture and urban planning, Dialogue-based public art, and Art for public health. Miles (1997) terms everything under Art as a social process and separates the examples by their content, such as Art and AIDS, Cultural diversity, and Art and difference, among others. In parallel, Thompson (2012) proposes to look at their differences based on the methodologies: Types of gatherings, Media manipulation, Communication and Structural alternatives. It is a complex discussion and due to the limits of this paper, I am not able to give a comprehensive overview on it. Nevertheless I will chose three examples as a summary of the above mentioned categories.

## Social or Political

For many socially engaged artists there is a continued interest in impact, and often the realm of the political and social, symbolizes these ambitions. Politics today seem to completely circulate around economics and therefore the culture tends to become an arena for real ideological debate. Culture in general and art in particular then function as a venue where the political is allowed to be accepted (Lind & Nilsson, 2007).



*"Demonstration in Amude" (31.October 2015), Cezire Canton, Rojava, Photo: Jonas Staal*

Jonas Staal, a Dutch visual artist is the founder of *The New World Summit*, an artistic and political organization offering “alternative parliaments” to marginal communities that currently find themselves excluded from democracy. The organisation claims art as an imaginative space that is more political than politics itself. In their vision, art can provide a radical frame for the imagination, which can then help us to see what fate looks like. It can show us new visions and new ways of being organized (Keulemans, 2016). *The New World Summit* performs a so-called invitation to use art to contribute to the imaginary of a new world and rethink the concept of democracy.

### **Engaged or Dialogue based public art**

Although artworks, like Tilted Arc created a tremendous amount of public discussion, projects in this category make dialogue an essential element of the work itself. They are created through a deliberate process of collaboration and dialogue to merge art and life together (Finkelpearl, 2001).



*Mierle Laderman Ukeles, "Touch Sanitation Performance", 1978 – 1980, with the New York City Department of Sanitation, New York, New York. Photograph courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts.*

In 1978-1980, in the *Touch Sanitation Performance*, Mierle Ukeles went to every single facility throughout the New York City department of Sanitation and said to every single worker: “Thank you for keeping New York City alive”. This performance took her 11 months and involved about 10.000 sanitary workers. This work is characterized by an exceptional engagement with the public (Finkelpearl, 2001). Her commitment and dialogue with these people also brought a dialogue within a wider public not only on environmental consciousness - toxicity, waste, hygiene – but on the nature of public space. It gave a voice to one of the most invisible groups in society, the sanitary workers, who because they handled waste, often were themselves as well treated as waste (Miles, 1997).

## Public or Structural alternatives

Aware of the lack of public spaces as an open place for debate - public sphere -, artists and designers explore alternative ways in sustaining “the right to take direct part in the management of cities, the right to participation” (Plyushteva, 2009, p.86). This can take shape in many forms, from public installations, producing books, holding firework displays to hijacking places for specific events and interventions (Harrington, 2007)



*City Mine(d) Ball: Three meter ball empowering young people to claim space in the city, 2000*

*Image credit: City Mine(d)*

City Mine(d) is a non-profit arts and civil society organization with the aim to involve local residents in urban redevelopment. Their work often starts with simply taking tables outside in the street and inviting area residents to think about how they want to live. Their interventions use public space as a place of meeting, debate and sharing skills, and remind people of the alternative proposals that are always present in cities. In their case, rather than simply performing artistic projects in an unconventional location, the work is seen as a starting point for rethinking the city and the political life of urban areas (Loftus, 2006).

## Conclusion

Categorizing socially engaged public art is difficult, because it interferes with many different sectors of our life. Nevertheless, there is a pattern appearing. We can look at these works based on intention - social or political – artists situate themselves in the field of daily social-political struggle together with their public, aiming to influence political actions - *The New World Summit* -, on methodologies – engaged or dialogue based - works exclusively characterized around a long-term engagement and direct deliberation with the public - *Touch sanitation performance* -, and on spatial characteristics - public or structural alternatives - urban interventions, dedicated to the development of new forms of

urban citizenship and the re-appropriation of public space - City Mine (d) - (Thompson, 2012, Miles, 1997, Finkelpearl, 2001). However perhaps the biggest category above these three, what creates tremendous discussions around these works is the question of whether these projects are in fact works of art. The development of the last thirty years of artistic works entering the social realm brought an ethical turn as well in their interpretation. This means that these works are no longer judged by aesthetics, like art used to be, but by their social impact. It is feared then, that the artistic value of these works will be judged by whether they can solve social or political problems (Bishop, 2012). It is also proposed that these works should not be understood under an art movement anymore but rather as a complex cultural production (Thompson, 2012).

## 5. Final conclusion and recommendation

In the beginning of this literature review I posed the question of how socially engaged public art contributes to the public sphere. I examined both of the definitions from a historical and a critical analysis and I demonstrated some examples. The public sphere is a complex concept with many critical theories around it, which has been present since the beginning of 1960s, though academic interest began to grow around socially engaged public art in the 1990s. The main conflict that arises in those critical observations is, whether we can discuss and analyze these socially engaged art works as art or whether they are creating a new contemporary field, which cannot be looked at as an art movement anymore. The danger in tilting the balance towards the social rather than the artistic is the possibility of replacing artistic value with social and political agendas and to lose aesthetic judgment, as Bishop concludes. What she envisioned in 2006 specially for Europe, is real by now. Artistic projects are more and more forced to justify their social commitment and are evaluated by their social impact. As an artist working in Europe, I can definitely confirm this. However I would argue that the solution would be to push them back to the aesthetic side and to not examine further what else is in there beside art. Thompson proposes us an easy solution by calling them complex cultural productions as opposed to art. With this he relieves us from looking at them through the restriction of artistic debates and opens up a larger territory. This new definition is rather vague but allow us to explore to a further unknown direction. Could these works be social or scientific experiments, radical frames for unrealistic situations?

The public sphere, as it was described and idealized by Habermas, never existed in reality. According to Fraser, one of its most important elements, accessibility was always neglected. It excluded women and racial minorities and was limited to like-minded members of the same property-owning class. Therefore we can conclude, that the concept as it is known today, is based on a utopia. The utopia of the perfect place and the place that cannot be, as it's understood from the original Greek meaning. Habermas saw the success of democracy in a healthy public sphere, where everyone is welcome to shape public opinion. If there is no such place in reality, then where else can we train our democracy? This is exactly what *The New World Summit* claims. It claims art as an imaginative space for a new world; an unrealistic situation - a temporary parliament built in Syria for example - provoking a critical discussion on a future vision. All the examples mentioned in this review can be understood this way; non-realistic situations or a fictional realities. Alys, the artist of *When faith moves mountains*, often says that he is less interested in making objects than in making myths or designing collective experiences and situations.

The *Touch Sanitation Performance*, Ukeles clearly named as a performance and by this, she gave a clear frame for how to look at it. To me the artistic quality therefore lies in the choices she made. For example the ritual of the handshake she gave to each person she met, and its repetition throughout the eleven months. It was a symbolic and artistic gesture of literally touching something you are not supposed to do, things that are dirty/unsanitary, and at the same time it opened further discussion about more complex social and political issues. For example the tension between something so obviously present, the maintenance work and being denied at the same time, by disrespecting most of the sanitary workers. The handshake was a simple gesture of making the invisible visible. She simply brought maintenance work and those who perform it into public view, making it a public concern.

The two most important element of the public sphere is accessibility and public participation. Although for Habermas the actual place was never important, many urbanists and sociologists claim we can only reach true public opinion and public participation through our diverse encounters in public space. The virtual sphere by now broken down national boundaries and created an almost global public sphere. But it is also feared to be only a simulation of public engagement. When we are called to action through the virtual community, we must be aware of the difference between feeling involved and actually participating in the lives of our neighbors and the civic life of our communities.

Following this thoughts public space remains an important sphere that is truly accessible to all, where society is confronted with its diversity and which has the potential to actively engage with our public causes via physical presence: demonstrations or occupations for example. Art works, that are situated in the public space, have the potential to foster such an engagements both via participation and discussion. They can become something else then art, perhaps a fictive space for training our critical and participative skills or an experiment to see what a debate that is truly accessible to all looks like. Of course as long as it stays within the realm of art, it must be looked at within that, within aesthetics. The question would then be, when they leave the realm of art how else we can look at them? Can they grow into a new field whose understanding on the world is not based on numbers and facts, but on artistic sensibility? Should this sensibility be measured, collected, analyzed and even integrated and if yes then how? How would some of these works develop if they would be also judged by sociologists, urbanists, psychologists, designers and even government officials? These are just some of the questions I would pose for further research.

As an artist I claim the importance of art. Pure art that can not be measured within certain political or social logistics. At the same time I also don't deny the existence of a new direction growing out of it. Something perhaps isn't that new but developing. Something perhaps isn't that easy to categorize but worst the effort to analyze, what new understanding and knowledge it may or may not give to us about our living together.

## 6. References

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