MAPPING THE TERRAIN

New Genre Public Art

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I got a call from Mom and Dad as they sat in front of their television set in Wasco. They were watching news reports of the obscenity trial of Dennis Barrie, director of the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center, for displaying Robert Mapplethorpe’s photographs. Was Mapplethorpe an artist or a pornographer? Later they sent me clippings from the local newspaper on *The Umbrellas* by the artist Christo, which was located a few miles from their home in a small farming community in California’s Central Valley. Judging from the tone of the articles, the local people, after questions early on, seemed ready to believe that Christo was indeed an artist, although not one that fit their preconceptions.

What do modern artists do? Mom and Dad have their opinions. The media has made them armchair connoisseurs in a time of tremendous transition in the role of visual artists. Whether through studio art (for a specific art world audience) or public art (for a broader popular audience), artists have achieved a level of public visibility not experienced in several decades, if ever. This is in part a consequence of an increased level of personal visibility in the culture at large. From an assumed “right to know” about the lives of politicians, to the revelation of family secrets, including spouse abuse and incest, formerly private lives have assumed the character of public property through the media. Visual artists are no exception, and many have catapulted into national prominence overnight by virtue of controversies surrounding their work. What artists do and what they “ought” to do constitutes a territory of public debate in which we seek a broadened paradigm for the meaning of art in our times.

The discussion is elaborated. In art schools faculty argue over the place of craftsmanship, subject matter, exhibition venues, and the relationship between new genre public art and more traditional art forms. The art world struggles with multiculturalism and its implications for different
audiences and approaches to making art. Public art has become a highly competitive alternative gallery system in which artists are thrust into contact with a broad and diversified audience, each group bringing its own contributions to the debate.

Clashes occur—we ask questions that have not, in this country, been asked of visual artists since the New Deal, when government support for artists evoked a dialogue about art's service to society. One of the central questions at the heart of the recent censorship controversies is, in fact, about public right and private accountability. Should people fund, through the National Endowment for the Arts, artworks that offend “public sensibility”? Our curiosity has been stimulated: just what is public art, how does it get made, by whom, and for whom?

Within art criticism, public art has challenged the illusion of a universal art and introduced discussions on the nature of public—its frames of reference, its location within various constructs of society, and its varied cultural identities. The introduction of multiple contexts for visual art presents a legitimate dilemma for critics: what forms of evaluation are appropriate when the sites of reception for the work, and the premise of “audience,” have virtually exploded? When artists decided to address Mom and Dad in Wasco as one potential audience, criticism itself had to change, since the nature of meaning is perceived so differently by various audiences.

One temporary solution has been to emphasize descriptive writing. Some writers have assumed a more participatory role with artists in the process of the work, feeling that recontextualizing the work within other frames of reference—the larger social context prescribed by the issue—is an appropriate critical response. (This approach, however valuable, begs the question of evaluation at the heart of art criticism.) Other critics simplistically apply criteria inherited from early artist practitioners of new public art forms to work that is well advanced in concept, intention, and complexity. It is evident that criticism has not caught up with practice.

In the instances throughout this century when art has moved outside the confines of traditional exhibition venues, or even remained within them and challenged the nature and social meaning of art, analysis has been a contested and politicized terrain. Until a critical approach is realized,
this work will remain relegated to outsider status in the art world, and its ability to transform our understanding of art and artists’ roles will be safely neutralized.

Misconceptions and confused thinking abound. What is needed at this point is a more subtle and challenging criticism in which assumptions—both those of the critic and those of the artist—are examined and grounded within the worlds of both art and social discourse. Notions of interaction, audience, artists’ intentions, and effectiveness are too freely used, often without sufficient interrogation and almost never within comprehensive conceptual schemes that differentiate and shed meaning on the practice of new genre public art. What follows are discussions of these notions, along with suggestions for expanding our critical approach.

**INTERACTION**

Current attempts to deal critically with new forms of public art often assume an unexamined partisanship with the public through a vaguely constituted idea of interactivity. In a recent article in *Art Papers*, one writer critiqued the notion of audience engagement in *Culture in Action*, a series of art projects in Chicago communities, because, as she said, if the artists really meant to be interactive, they would have used interactive video technology! In fact, interaction cannot be measured exclusively by either the artist’s methodology or media, or by other commonly used criteria, such as audience size.

What might a more complex critical analysis entail? In looking at this one aspect of new genre public art—the interactive quality that, by definition, is characteristic—a more comprehensive scheme might incorporate all of the above, along with the artist’s intention and the work’s meaning to its constituencies. For example, the diagram below represents a model in which a continuum of positions is represented. These are not discrete or fixed roles, but are delineated for the purposes of discussion, allowing us to more carefully investigate aesthetic strategies. At any given time, an artist may operate at a different point on the spectrum or may move between them.
Subjectivity and Empathy: Artist as Experiencer

In more traditional art, the artist’s experience is thought to be represented in a visual object; such subjectivity, in fact, is taken to be fundamental to art. Performance and conceptual art helped to isolate the process of art, sometimes even substituting process for object. To investigate what interactive skills visual artists might bring to the public agenda and to assess how these might relate to a larger audience, we could start here, with one of the most basic elements of art: the experiencing being.

In August 1991, I sat for seven days in an abandoned hospital room at Roswell Park Cancer Center in upstate New York, charting the private conversations I had with patients, nurses, doctors, scientists, and administrators. The artwork was located in the interaction between myself as artist and the members of the community, framed by the hospital room and fueled by the human need to reflect on the meaning of one’s life and work. In this and countless other works that take place largely within the domain of experience, the artist, like a subjective anthropologist, enters the territory of the Other and presents observations on people and places through a report of her own interiority. In this way the artist becomes a conduit for the experience of others, and the work a metaphor for relationship.

Although we tend to pigeonhole subjectivity as nonpolitical, one of the major contributions of feminist thought in the past two decades is that individual experience has profound social implications. Experiencing has been manipulated in the service of advertising and politics, for example, where products and politicians are linked to desire and values. Private experience has lost an authenticity in the public sector that art may, at least symbolically, return to us. To make of oneself a conduit for expression of a whole social group can be an act of profound empathy. When there is no
quick fix for some of our most pressing social problems, there may be only our ability to feel and witness the reality taking place around us. This empathy is a service that artists offer to the world.

**Information Revealed: Artist as Reporter**

In the role of reporter, the artist focuses not simply on the experience but on the recounting of the situation; that is, the artist gathers information to make it available to others. She calls our attention to something. We might divide this practice of presenting information along lines of intentionality. Some artists claim simply to “reflect” what exists without assignment of value; others “report,” implying a more conscious, less random selection of information.

Reporting might be compared to aesthetic framing. Roland Barthes, in commenting on Diderot, explains with analogies from theater and painting how intentional framing is inherently political: “In order to tell a story, the painter has only an instant at his disposal, the instant he is going to immobilize on the canvas, and he must thus choose it well.” What will be seen is what the artist will have seen, and thus the chosen image is an instant in which the historical meaning and political surround of the reported information can be read in a single glance. In this way the artist as reporter may be said to engage with an audience not only to inform but to persuade. Perhaps for this reason, when artists first enter the sociopolitical arena they often adopt this role.

Reporting implies a conscious selection, though not necessarily an analysis, of information. In *Amazonia*, performance artist Rachel Rosenthal dramatizes the destruction of the South American rain forest and the slaughter of its inhabitants. The strength of this soliloquy is its inexorable rage, conveyed in a theatrically choreographed incantation of the names of the native peoples, trees, and animal species from this rapidly disintegrating environment. No answers are posited (indeed, is there any appropriate response other than *stop*?), save the artist’s belief that after experiencing, revealing information is the next compassionate step.
Situations and Solutions: Artist as Analyst

From reporting, or presenting information, to analysis is a short step, but the implied shift in an artist's role is enormous. In the first two modes of working—experiencer and reporter—we see an emphasis on the intuitive, receptive, experiential, and observational skills of the artist. As artists begin to analyze social situations through their art, they assume for themselves skills more commonly associated with social scientists, investigative journalists, and philosophers. Such activities position artists as contributors to intellectual endeavor and shift our aesthetic attention toward the shape or meaning of their theoretical constructs.

Reporting is inevitably followed by analysis. In the mid-eighties contemporary photographers from the United States and other countries found themselves moving naturally from simple observation of environmental disasters to political theorizing. In 1986 they formed the Atomic Photographers Guild to pursue projects related to nuclear issues. For example, Richard Misrach's *Bravo 20: The Bombing of the American West* presents a tongue-in-cheek proposal to convert a test bomb site into a national park.

When an artist adopts the position of analyst, the visual appeal of imagery is often superseded by the textual properties of the work, thus challenging conventions of beauty. Their analysis may assume its aesthetic character from the coherence of the ideas or from their relationship to visual images rather than through the images themselves. In this way, art of analysis draws on the history of conceptual art during the sixties, when artists explored the dematerialization of art as object and its rematerialization in the world of ideas.

Building Consensus: Artist as Activist

The last step along the proposed continuum is from analysis to activism, where art making is contextualized within local, national, and global situations, and the audience becomes an active participant. Martha Rosler explored New York City as an artist-analyst, but her work could be said to cross over into activism. *If You Lived Here... The City in Art, Theory,*
and Social Actions, an assemblage of exhibitions, symposiums, photographs, and writings sponsored by the Dia Art Foundation in New York, amassed the work of artists and activists dealing with the current crisis in American urban housing policies. The works considered how artists have found themselves squarely in the midst of real estate speculation and shortsighted housing policies. An analysis of housing and homelessness was punctuated by proposed and actual interventions that served as models for activism.

In seeking to become catalysts for change, artists reposition themselves as citizen-activists. Diametrically opposed to the aesthetic practices of the isolated artist, consensus building inevitably entails developing a set of skills not commonly associated with art making. To take a position with respect to the public agenda, the artist must act in collaboration with people, and with an understanding of social systems and institutions. Entirely new strategies must be learned: how to collaborate, how to develop multilayered and specific audiences, how to cross over with other disciplines, how to choose sites that resonate with public meaning, and how to clarify visual and process symbolism for people who are not educated in art. In other words, artist-activists question the primacy of separation as an artistic stance and undertake the consensual production of meaning with the public.

To the preceding scheme (or any other developed by the critic), one would then add a discussion of such issues as audience size, use of media, and artists’ methodology, contextualizing those evaluations within a more specific analysis of the work’s interactivity.

AUDIENCE

We have traditionally considered the relationship between artwork and audience as a dyad, with more or less exchange between the two. Some would have it that communication proceeds from the artist, through the artwork, toward a receptive audience. At various moments in art history the passivity of that audience has been challenged, for example, during abstract expressionist “happenings” when the audience and its movement
through the site of the work were considered to be part of the art. Many public artists today suggest that the communication is two-way, some going so far as to propose that the space between artist and audience is, in fact, the artwork.

Contemporary critics, following the lead of artistic practice, have begun deconstructing the audience, most often along the specific identity lines of gender, race, and, less often, class. But the relationship of the audience to the work process is not clearly articulated. Of interest is not simply the makeup or identity of the audience but to what degree audience participation forms and informs the work—how it functions as integral to the work’s structure.

One possible evaluative construct might be to see the audience as a series of concentric circles with permeable membranes that allow continual movement back and forth. Nonhierarchical in intention, such a description allows us to deconstruct in an audience-centered model the notion of interactivity that in the previous section was premised in the artist’s role.

If we represent the genesis of the work as a point in the center of the circle, radiating out—like the waves caused by a rock in a pond—would be the individuals or groups of people who assume different degrees of responsibility for the work. Genesis and responsibility are paired in this model, the center equaling the creative impetus. From this center, the basis of which varies from artwork to artwork, emerge images and structures (though not necessarily the meaning—that is completed by the audience). The center of the circle are those without whom the work could not exist. In the case of Houston Conwill, Estella Conwill Májozo, and Joseph De
Pace, for example, their interactive public works are centrally driven by the creative energy of the three collaborators.

The next circle out from the center includes the collaborators or codevelopers, shareholders who have invested time, energy, and identity in the work and who partake deeply in its ownership. Often these consist of both artists and community members, and without their contribution the work would not go forward. Nevertheless, at this level of involvement, the loss of any single member, though perhaps serious in implication for the work, will not dramatically alter its essential character.

It is important to emphasize here that such divisions are somewhat arbitrary and used for the sake of clarifying our thinking about audience. In reality, those in the center and in the first concentric ring are not always so clearly defined, and, more important, in an actively functioning participatory work, movement between levels of engagement is designed into the system. The more responsibility assumed, the more central the participants' role in the generation of the work. Collaborative partners become more or less central as the work finds its shape.

The next level of participation would be the volunteers and performers, those about, for, and with whom the work is created. In Danny Martinez's project for *Culture in Action*, this level would be represented by the busloads of community members who paraded through two neighborhoods in Chicago. It would include the community members and representatives of various organizations who volunteered to organize the parade.

Another ring of the circle consists of those who have a direct experience of the artwork. Traditionally called the audience, these are the people who attend a performance or visit an installation. Because of the open-ended invitational properties of a community-based artwork and the time involved in creating it, those attending the final presentation or exhibition are often more engaged than, for example, museum-goers. Among those who visit Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial each year are a large number of veterans and their families who bring to the wall a deep level of experiential engagement (and account in large part for the work's success). Among the audience for Sheila Levrant de Bretteville's Little Tokyo Project will be those who have lived and worked there and whose words and experiences are memorialized in the concrete beneath their feet.
The effects of the work often continue beyond the exhibition or performance of interactive public art, and are magnified in the audience that experiences the work through reports, documentations, or representation. This audience includes people who read about the artwork in newspapers, watch it on television, or attend subsequent documentary exhibitions. They expand the reach of the work and are, depending on the artist’s intention, more or less integral to the work’s construction. At least a part of this audience carries the artwork over time as myth and memory. At this level the artwork becomes, in the literature of art or in the life of the community, a commonly held possibility.

Fundamental to the above construction of the audience is its flexible and fluid nature. At no point is the level of participation fixed, and depending on the criteria established through the work, participants move back and forth between levels. Thus a street person who observes a performance by the Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD) might be inspired to attend a workshop and serve as an “extra” in a performance. By LAPD’s criteria, which include willingness to dedicate time and a certain level of theatrical ability, someone from the audience could move progressively toward the center of generation and responsibility. In such large-scale public artworks, many of which exist over long periods of time, the reverse movement also takes place, such as when life circumstances or interests move participants toward an outer circle in which they may remain engaged and informed audience members. This model charges the construction of audience with activity rather than simply identity.

These models of audience engagement are of course useful only if they encourage appropriate complexity when considering the notion of interaction. But through such scrutiny an important implication is revealed: the educative function of new genre public art. Often such art puts forth specific information or content to substantiate its pedagogical claims, but we may also ask what learning results from the interactive forms of the work, and whether the very structure, including artist and audience roles, predicts the success of the educational intention.
If criticism follows artistic practice, though many contemporary examples might show the reverse to be the case, then particularly when art changes form, critical constructs must take into account the artist’s expression of intention. Arlene Raven underlines the potential discrepancy between intention and results when she asks, “Does the artist’s intention to do good mean that the work is, in fact, good?” The hitch is that artists’ stated purposes do not express the multiple, including unconscious, levels on which art operates. Perhaps most dubious when they evaluate the “success” of their work, artists’ expressions of intention are nevertheless signposts for future directions in criticism, because intention suggests real or potential contexts for the art. Intention portends criteria for evaluation. Most important, intention establishes the values premised within the work, and assembled values are the artist’s construction of meaning.

Now we enter a familiar terrain for art theory. What questions does the artwork ask of art itself? How does it enter into or challenge contemporary discourse? What questions does it ask of life? In this interrogation, we encounter the artist’s philosophical and political biases, what he or she believes to be true about people, culture, and action. Assuming that we can at the very least comment on belief systems and meaning within the work, what role does an issue like “depth” play? That is, is the work a substantive and meaningful addition to cultural or intellectual life? Does it add to our understanding?

With these questions comes a particular dilemma for new genre public art critics: can, or how can, a materialized belief system be evaluated? Raven’s deliberate use of “good” underscores our vulnerability in matching our beliefs to the artist’s, comparing and holding as good any mutuality. One critic values contemplation and the other activity; one espouses leftist politics and the other right fundamentalism. In fact, while all art represents artists’ understandings of meaning, the often culturally interventionist intentions of some artists threaten the stance of “objectivity” by which criticism attempts to deify art.
With a candidness born of necessity, critics writing about this work often acknowledge up front their passionate advocacy of the worldview embodied in the work they describe. If we choose not to ignore the question of artists' intentions (too risky on the cusp of change in art practice—artists often lead us in new and unpredictable directions), then perhaps partisan criticism is the most honest approach. Critics must inevitably enter the discussion personally and philosophically when approaching work that intends toward social meaning. Likewise, the audience's beliefs and intentions with respect to the art and its subjects become part of the total picture.

**Effectiveness**

One evaluative criterion heretical to common assumptions about art is effectiveness. Art is assumed to be effective if it is beautiful, despite differing cultural constructions of beauty, and if it fulfills functions of revelation or transcendence. Once it departs from this inherited ideology, art criticism flounders before unexamined critical assumptions. Is public art effective, as Arthur Danto suggests, when it reflects some fundamental harmony of shape or perspective? Is it effective when the audience takes action or is changed in some fashion? As forms, intentions, and strategies for making art depart from tradition and—in public art—as audiences change, multiply, and become more complex, the critical consideration of effectiveness has remained relatively unexamined.

Rooted in vague sociological, or more precisely, sociometric, precepts, critical response to new genre public art suggests but does not actually deliver measurement. Scale is sometimes deemed a measure of effectiveness, as is a hypothesized change in the makeup of the audience. These assumptions actually do lead to provocative questions that must be answered to develop appropriate criticism for this art. Is, for example, Mierle Laderman Ukeles's proposed but only partially realized public art display in a marine transfer station in New York City (Flow City) more or less successful than Mel Ziegler and Kate Ericson's completed project for Culture in Action? In one case the work would potentially involve a large public audience; in the other a small handful of people was actually affected. Is an actualized work more effective than a proposal? Is the
number of people involved a criterion for success? Is a work more effective if a community is mobilized toward some end? Does it matter what the end is, what the actions are? What if, as in the case of John Ahearn’s sculpture for a plaza in the South Bronx, the community is mobilized against the work itself? Does shape, eloquence, or visual appeal take precedence over the work’s accessibility to community residents?

Artists themselves participate in a conflation of art and sociology. Unlike sociologists, however, our measurements are often assumed rather than stated. Whereas a sociologist might measure the number of times within a given period that an issue was referred to in the media, in art we guess at the distribution of ideas. We do not take surveys to determine to what extent art changes its constituencies’ beliefs or practices. Nor, in fact, do we carefully assess the actions stimulated by a work of art. We assume a host of causal effects, often on the basis of unexamined political notions.

We assume, for example, that the LAPD is effective in changing ideas about homelessness, but how do we evaluate this? Do we accept the subjective reports of those few homeless company members? Hungry for change and exchange and impact, artists often grasp at the experience of one or more individuals, recounted in narratives that attest to the work’s effect. We leap from individual experience to much larger assumptions. If three people’s lives, by their own recounting, are affected, if thirty people’s lives are affected after the work, can we draw any conclusions about either the scale or duration of change? Such evaluations must be taken as one component of understanding, one piece of a larger puzzle, but must be more carefully explored.

Perceived notions of change based on political and sociological models and extrapolated from personal experiential reports are necessary but insufficient in evaluating new genre public art. This work also functions, as does all art, as a representation or model. The work might, for example, hypothesize potential collaboration among people rather than demonstrate actual interaction. It might suggest a possibility for cooperation and exchange that does not currently exist, or it might be a model for artists themselves, stretching the boundaries, incorporating new forms, giving permission for invention. It is possible that process-oriented public
art is at its most powerful when, as with most visual art forms, it operates as a symbol. The relationship of demonstrable effects to the impact of a metaphor must be grappled with as this work attempts to function simultaneously within both social and aesthetic traditions.

I got a call from Mom and Dad in Wasco. Although our politics are worlds apart, my father—a congenial and loving humanist but only slightly to the left of Jesse Helms on some social issues—believes deeply in the expressive and communicative potential of art. In fact, Dad is a painter of oil landscapes. Representative of one of many new art audiences, my working-class parents serve as a touch point for me as I consider the conflicts in our values, our profound points of agreement, and the potential role of art in an examination of meaning. The intersection of “high art” with expanded audiences demands a rigorous examination of our premises and the development of new skills and strategies. The introduction of Mom and Dad into a hermetic discourse demands a change in art criticism.

What do public artists do? Inevitably we must come to understand this work’s relationship to what is called “real life.” Art as a profession, taught in art schools and displayed in museums, has created a paradoxical division between its practice and its public locus. The confrontational framing that figures prominently in recent art controversies is in part a product of the modernist model of the artist. Alone in her studio, the artist creates through a struggle that, at various times, pits the individual against nature, culture, society, or the art world itself. It could be argued that this heroic tradition serves the integrity of an intensely private studio practice, which might still have some value in maintaining the pure, individualist expression that enables artists to serve society from a vantage point of outside observer. But in the studio of the public sector, in the culture of visibility, such conventions of artistic practice are challenged. My dad knows this. The audience for his work—family, neighbors, and friends—is intimately connected to his communicative and expressive intentions.

The extensive body of artistic work from the past three decades in the compendium of this book at the very least expands artists’ repertoires to
include a more intimate and engaged relationship with an audience. At the most, it illustrates that the modernist model is no longer viable in a multicultural and globally interconnected world, that visual artists are, as theorist Suzi Gablik suggests, struggling to find new roles more appropriate to our time. The question is, can criticism match the scope of this endeavor?

NOTES


5. In October 1982, I raised several of these issues in the “Speakeasy” column of *New Art Examiner*. 