

Theories and Uses in Common: Responses of Art in the Public Sphere

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Abstract

Different theories on public sphere(s) complete each other or collide in examining the intersubjective relationships involved in organizing and administering the responses of society to the political and economical power repertory. Habermas's default theory, who invokes the critical participation of every citizen in the public communication, is rather extended in the counter-theories represented by Fraser's "subaltern counterpublics", Mouffe's "agonistic politics" or Hardt and Negri's "shared commons". These observations are undertaken by artists in their public art practices and inform the contemporary art theories on audience participation.

Keywords: public, counter-public, art, communication, agonistic, commons

This article is analysing different positions addressed in the public sphere theories informed by Habermas, extended in such counter-theories as Fraser's "subaltern counterpublics", Mouffe's "agonistic politics", or Hardt and Negri's "shared commons" and applied in public art practices.

The various philosophical concepts and theories are engaged in an exchange of services aiming to improve the understanding and the pragmatics of the codes used in negotiating positions in a publically ordered environment. Acceptations and uses inform and orient an economic process of accumulation and reinvestment of the cognitive capital flow. The know-how ensures the success of intersubjective communication, but it cannot guarantee the public benefit.

Critiques attempt to regulate deficits and excesses, and novelty can redistribute complacencies.

The most sophisticated theories regarding the formation and finalities of the public sphere/spheres meet in the realms of experiencing the new knowledge concerning world crises or on the neutral blackboards of serially connected academies. The discourse is wild/barbaric according to the instinct of the new conquests, or disciplined/controlled according to the norms of the old defence. From time to time, the combatants visit and tolerate each other or else defy each other. Social theorists separate themselves from the urban geographers who negotiate or disparage street artists. Exclusivist curators report the conclusions of inclusive sociologists, while researchers in the area clamour against philosophy patriarchs. The public arena is sometimes a place under the sun for everyone, sometimes a show of honest puppeteers, sometimes a mall of ideas defining identitary styles, sometimes a space of play and strife.

The meeting between the empire of philosophical theories concerning the public space and the guerrilla of public art creates an event of experiences (be they illuminating or obscuring), a detour of thought (be it social, phenomenological, fictional), or an echo of answers (be they in vain or for the project).

One of the main trends in philosophy is to see the public sphere as a form of social reality, and less as an act of creation whose results would be negotiated intersubjectively. The theory of mutual interests and concerns of individuals or collectivities takes for granted a rational and democratic delimitation of the establishment and exercise of discourse and practices in the current public sphere. This “mediation area” between the normativity imposed by the representatives of the state and the moral beliefs of private individuals seems to have been born spontaneously as a requirement of social reality. In these circumstances, steps were taken at grassroots level in order to reconnect historically and ideologically the political authorities to the everyday lives of common people.

The operational philosophy of the bourgeois public sphere implies a voluntary initiation of communication from the private spheres, individualised through the self-cultivation of

subjectivity, towards the public sphere, collectivised through the creation of frameworks for intersubjective debates on cultural, political and economic topics. Rationally constructed and critically instrumented arguments have the role of blurring the politically underlined distinction between the state apparatus and the society's "subjective" voices. However, the state's intervention in the private lives of individuals and the integration of private interests into the state policy use the "legal" argumentation of actions only as a form of public justification.

According to Habermas, the citizen's new identity is that of a client for the services provided by the state. Public debate between citizens and the representatives of the state is replaced by the competition for power between the parties run by professional politicians. Public opinion is replaced by statistics and "studies" based on focus group surveys, facilitating data manipulation and control for the benefit of politicians. By turning the media into an advertising market, public communication is eventually moderated in favour of economic satisfactions obtained as a result of broadening passive audience and diminishing critical participation (Habermas 1989).

The late modernity perspective on the understanding of the public sphere (Cohen and Arato 1988; Cohen and Arato 1992) insists on the mediation of a vision of dividing the modern world into "system" and "life-world". Through the "life-world", located in the civil society, people communicate in an intersubjective manner. Featuring two distinct levels – a level of implicit knowledge of traditions seeded in language and culture, manifested in daily life, and the level of behaviour structuring depending on culture, society and personality –, the "life-world" is reproduced through the institutionalised communication processes of cultural transmission, social integration and socialisation. The public and the private aspects of the system and of the "life-world" are characterised on the one side by the relation with the political subsystem in public life, and on the other side by the institutionalised public communication calling on legal rights and on personal relation in the private space.

The postmodern perspective discusses several positions, from the remark that nowadays public discussions are structured around “cults and cliques” (Tolson 1991, 196) to the realisation of the agonistic character and of the orientation towards hegemonic projects of the processes that determine social relations (Laclau and Mouffe 1985), up to the option of using dialogue in negotiating the mutual interests of those who live in alternative public spheres (Fraser 1992).

When talking about alternative public spheres in terms of “subaltern counterpublics”, Nancy Fraser discusses the existence of “parallel discursive arenas” where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs (Fraser 1995, 291). The inequalities between the participants in the establishment of the public sphere cannot be ignored in the moments of discursive deliberation.

As far as the approach of the relational and institutional school of thought is concerned, the public sphere is seen as a place of organisational and symbolic practices operating within certain networks of rules, structural connections, public narrations contextualised in a historical environment and relying on social relational structures (Somers 1993). Without being limited to spaces or worlds in which politics is subject to discussion, what is public implies interstitial networks of individuals and groups behaving as citizens (Emirbayer and Sheller 1998, 738). In these cases, the public sphere and the political culture are established like a space for the articulation of symbolic codes, values and representations influencing individual and political orientations.

One of the most recent and debated critiques of Habermas’ concept concerning the establishment and exercise of communication in the public sphere is the theory of competitive communication practices in a social sphere fragmented by various types of contestation. The distinction made by Negt and Kluge between the bourgeois and the proletarian public spheres fits the new theories of counterpublics from the point of view of the various analyses applied to the relation between the potentiality and the

realisation or the marginalisation and valorisation of social interests. Without being subject to a real suppression or to a possible assimilation, the life values also contained by the ideals of the proletarian public sphere become necessary for the survival of the bourgeois public sphere (Negt and Kluge 1993).

No matter how fluctuating the distinctions between public spheres may be, a new approach to the dissolution of the boundaries between the public and private spheres has emerged. Thus, for instance, sharing and joint participation, taking advantage of common resources, be they natural (air, water, fruit, soil) or cultural (knowledge, affects, languages, codes), are based on a number of interaction practices, on care and cohabitation in a common world, in favour of the common good. A resistance response is required against the intensification of the privatisation of common goods. If, for instance, a part of language (that of affects and gestures) we use in common were to be privatised, then the power of expression, creativity and communication would be lost. Seen as a social relation, capital depends on its inherent and antagonistic productive subjectivities. The capitalistic exploitation of social life may result in life being ordered according to the hierarchies of economic value. The new dominant forms of production involving information, knowledge, codes, imagery and affects require open access to what is shared in common: communication networks, databanks, cultural circuits (Hardt and Negri 2009).

According to Miwon Kwon, this change in the discourse concerning the public sphere is obviously felt in the practice of contemporary art, which has come to be viewed as a form of advertising (Ward 1995). Using Raymond Williams' typology regarding the four modes of communication practices (authoritarian, paternalistic, commercial and democratic) applied in the public sphere, Kwon brings a number of examples of public art which may be viewed as forms of advertising rather than artistic genres (Kwon 2005).

In presenting the contexts in which public artistic practices may be exercised, Kwon underlines that, according to Williams (Williams 1989), the authoritarian communication mode is characterised by a number of rigid values, manifesting

itself in a repressive manner and excluding those who challenge authority; the paternalistic mode is described as privileging an authoritarian communication with a conscience, taking on benevolently the role of educator and improver of the lives of others, treated as children who don't know what's best for them; the commercial mode challenges the monopolisation of power by authoritarian and paternalistic regimes, offering as a required foundation for freedom the model of the free market, but replacing state control with a new form of control determined by the principles of profitability and strengthening its power through control over mass-media; the democratic mode relies on the decentralisation of power and the maximisation of individual participation, through the opportunity to use public media and the self-determination of information production and distribution.

The examples discussed by Kwon illustrate the various communication situations described by Williams. Thus, in the case of Alexander Calder's work *La Grande Vitesse*, located in Grand Rapids, Michigan, – the first public sculpture sponsored in 1967 as part of the programme *Art in Public Places* of the National Endowment for the Arts – he identifies a type of paternalistic public communication, through the mediation of a discourse of visual and physical autonomy based on a modernist, abstract and biomorphic sculpture made of steel and painted red. Viewed as a “gift” from the government to the public, this sculpture mediates, with the help of “experts”, the educational and “elevated” values of a “high culture” in the daily lives of the inhabitants of the city.

In the case of the interdisciplinary project (artistic, architectural, design) in the Wiesner Building of the MIT campus in Cambridge, Massachusetts, we can speak of a conflicting combination of paternalistic attitude and commercial interest, due to the use of visual expression means in order to increase the real estate value and the gentrification of the surrounding buildings.

The work of Richard Serra, *Tilted Arc*, a piece of steel measuring 36.6 metres in length and 3.9 metres in height, installed between 1981 and 1989 in the Federal Plaza in downtown New York, and removed as a result of the public's

negative reactions, remains one of the most debated cases illustrating the relation between the authoritarian and the paternalistic communication modes. The ostensible superiority of the few supporters of such an artistic project, in which the functionality of a public space is replaced by a presumed artistic experience, comes into conflict with the position of the wider public, which is not willing to accept the assumptions of a cultural refinement through an exposure to art that is essentially “useless”. Eventually, even Serra's explanations – according to which the viewer, coming into contact with the work, becomes self-aware and aware of his/her own movement around the plaza space, thus witnessing the contraction and expansion of the sculpture in the field of vision – proved useless.

In order to exemplify the prefiguration of an exercise of democratic communication mode, Kwon brings up the theory of “new genre public art” belonging to artist Suzanne Lacy, according to which the new art in the public space relies on the participation and the collaboration of the representatives of the public in producing the work of art together with the artist (Lacy 1995). Interested in “social change”, this new genre of art operates from the perspective of an instrumental attitude with the purpose of facilitating change in public policies or of criticising social injustice. Nevertheless, in Kwon's acceptance, new genre public art is still paternalistic in its approach of “collaboration” with the public.

Her last example mentions the poster project *DaZiBao* carried out in 1983 by Group Material. Relying on a guerrilla-type action, the group put together an interactive installation with posters in New York's Union Square, designing a public place in which different opinions on current social and political topics were expressed (from the US military intervention in South America to abortion rights and the welfare system). In this case, the transience of the work of art reflected the process of a disjunctive, open and incommensurable communication.

If all these works of public art become problematic in their relation with the public due to the apprehension of a possible “Balkanisation of political identity” of those who are commissioned to produce such projects – through the distinct,

particular and idiosyncratic reactions to the meaning and aesthetic of representations –, one may invoke the need to reconsider the terms and practice of what is “in common”. In this case, the relation between the idealisation of the social effectiveness of a democratic public sphere and the localisation of artworks, as expressions of sets of opinions, beliefs, convictions, values and publicly-displayed attitudes, in a space of the new modes of counterexpression of privacies and publicity, calls for an agonistic analysis, drawing from a theoretical foundation already exercised in the writings of Chantal Mouffe.

In the foreword to her book about politics, Chantal Mouffe opposes the post-political vision, the vision of “democratising democracy” (which would be beyond hegemony and sovereignty) according to which we are at a stage in history in which the power of consensus reigns supreme, reconfirming her theory concerning the constitutive antagonistic dimension of “the political”. As a consequence, in contradiction with the tendency democracy theorists have to propose institutions that would aim to reconcile all conflicting interests and values through “impartial” procedures, Mouffe proposes the design of an “agonistic” public sphere, a challenging one, where various hegemonic political projects would clash (Mouffe 2005).

Taking into consideration the data of this theory, we may add to the four modes of communication set forth by Raymond Williams the agonistic communication mode, obvious in the critical artistic practice whose topics deal with issues of political and social cohabitation.

The difference occurring in the reception of public art resides in the distinction between the old practice of installing an aesthetic object in a physical space (oftentimes in the shape of displaying a monument) and the new practices of community interventions and socialisation process (oftentimes in the shape of performing an action).

Certain artists or groups of artists with civic experience – who can make the critical difference between types of cohabitation, from class, gender and race to those belonging to cultural differences and ecological positioning –, engage in the identification, analysis and answering of the community issues

they encounter. Their artistic actions are either resistance movements and social activism, or the reconstruction of local models that may encourage social change. The current artistic projects reflect the blurring of the boundaries between public and private spaces both through the participative and collaborative organisation of direct, creative and productive moments of socialisation, as well as through the advanced use of new technologies and new media in interactively establishing experiential codes. In certain circumstances, this creative intersection of spaces allows the political imagination of new possible worlds in which the pressing issues of today's world are overcome.

The identity and effectiveness of public art may be formulated starting from a number of remarks concerning the deficient critique outside art institutions – from the perspective of urban sociology and geography or of critical theory –, as well as the lack of evaluative reactions from the public in the areas where public art works are installed. As a consequence, in many public spaces we see both a decline of artistic practices, as well as the public art's failure to create a public. "Public art" is also examined from the perspective of the establishment of the dominant culture by national galleries and modern art museums, which, through their own programmes, try to model the public's reception of art. As a consequence, most commissioned public art in the West has privileged modernist and minimalist projects which would express "the freedom of thought and expression" of artists in an advanced liberal society (Miles 1997).

Coming from the area of social critical theory, some other voices, those of researchers of public art, separate themselves from the philosophical discourse of the rationality of communication established between the various public interests and promote in exchange an applied discourse of responses provided by the policies of improving the quality of life in pragmatic terms. Thus, for instance, public art is viewed as a potential instrument of improving the physical environment, of creating a sense of the place and of distinctiveness, of contributing to community cohesion and social health, of improving economic value through investment and tourism,

and even of reducing crime rates. However, until recently there have been no relevant studies supporting these results, no empirical measurement of the impact public art have on the various aspects of social life. In most cases we've dealt with local evaluations of effects on the participants in the reception of specific works of public art.

Recent studies have shed some light concerning the use of some key terms in defining the impact of public art on the social sphere. Thus, in the various reports concerning the function of the place and the role of identity in the reflection on public art, the term “place” is analysed as an open space in which can be found various types of influences and the dynamics of which is given by the continuous process of social relation and negotiation. The term “public” is understood as an “arena” in which people meet and engage in various social practices, and in which there are no exclusions based on degree of precariousness, on race, gender, or other personal circumstances. In these conditions, identity is not considered an original given, but it is instead viewed as a construction, more precisely as a product of interaction, the way space, in its turn, is produced by the intervention of the object or of the practice of public art (Massey and Rose 2003).

There where philosophy – under the shape of social critical theory rather than of metaphysics – meets art-in-the-public-space, multitude of positioning and receptions is generated. Valorisations are articulated depending on the various sets of beliefs, convictions and interests, and actions counter each other. When artists or critics happen to philosophise for the public and on behalf of the public, we may speak of an insertion of private meditations in an arena of public experiences. When the public expresses its satisfaction or disapproval, acting politically and legally, then the philosophers may claim interference in the private affairs of public reflection. In any of these situations we are dealing with an agonistic confrontation in which it is not accident but instead jurisprudence deciding on hegemony. This ending would not be a case of social arrogance and public prevalence, but instead a territory claiming and marking behaviour. Despite all these, learning collaboration and the joint production of meanings and

representations would attenuate the cruelty of exclusions and would dissipate the exaltation of ignorance.

The use in common of philosophical theories and artistic creations, through translations and educational mediation, could serve, without hinting at a prescription, to modify, rather than expand, the understanding of the role each individual holds in a specialised society, in which what is just depends mainly on interests rather than on paradigms.

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