Contemporary Public Art and Dialectical Aspects of the 'Democratization' of the Urban Public Space

Tijen Tunali
Aarhus Institute of Advanced Studies, Aarhus University, Denmark
tijen.tunali@aias.au.dk

1. Introduction

All artistic practices have a political dimension because they play a role in the constitution and maintenance of a given symbolic order but also create challenges to it. The contemporary art world's historic gatekeeper organizations – e.g., auction houses, museums, biennials and fairs, publishing houses, university departments and art schools – located in western Europe and the US since the late-nineteenth-century have derived their continuing power within the capitalist system, that are socio-political, ideological, cultural, aesthetic and economic. Hence, the art world's domination on art's production, dissemination and reception has also been limited and vulnerable to many kinds of social and cultural pressures.

Until the late nineteenth century, there had been no clear definition of public art and built environment. Architects were trained in the same school of sculptors and painters and churches, monasteries, squares, schools, hospitals, bridges, factories, etc. were embedded with paintings, sculptures, carvings, mosaics and ornaments. In the 1990s, we have encountered discussions on the separation between, public art, street art and graffiti, based on their situation as sanctioned or not, how they constitute urban publics and their public functions based on a committed relationship between content and audience. Although the avant-garde modern art contested the perspective that understands aesthetic experience as the disinterested perception of unified form long ago, it is rather a recent phenomenon to acknowledge the sociality of art in the public space as its inherent aesthetic property.

Recently, with what has been described as a 'spatial turn of social theory' (Soja 2008) and 'social turn of art' (Bishop 2006) we witness changes in art's engagement with politics from igniting critical awakening in society to creating communal and egalitarian relations in the public spaces and the spaces of activism. Diversification in socially engaged art, as well as contemporary art's erasure of medium specificity, has prompted artists to establish a more direct dialogue with the public, and in public spaces.

Public art --as art that has an active presence in the urban pubic space characterized by a dynamic becoming and a continuous social exchange-- can give us answers about the manifestations of power and its everyday presence and representation in our urban lives. The role of public art in reconstituting the urban space as one of the defining elements of urban culture renders a twofold role. Public art has been compatible with corporate intervention and state control but we have also witnessed insurgency in the urban public spaces showing how art and emancipatory politics intertwine. Therefore, in looking at art and public space, it is essential to adopt a dialectic and materialist perspective, which acknowledge that public art and public space are two social spheres in dynamic, intertwined and evolving relations with each other and cannot be separated from any other social phenomena in contemporary society and culture.

Urban public space is a complex and multifaceted notion that covers a wide variety of social and public locations, ranging from the street to the squares, from the children's playground to sports facilities, from the neighborhood to

recreational parks. Neoliberal urbanism is driven by political motivations towards using aesthetics as a strategy for private profits that causes the loss of urban public spaces, the exclusion of neighborhood residents from planning decisions and the forced relocation of poorer residents due to rising rent and run-down buildings. On the one hand, contemporary urban space has become increasingly regulated and policed, and is therefore defined by a process of exclusion based on race, gender, class, sexuality, age, disability. At the same time, economic injustices, social exclusion and cultural reifications caused by new urbanism result in the growing praxis of urban social resistances. Urban public space has also become a physical and symbolic ground for political action as a site of protest for the labor movement, women's rights, sexual liberation, racial equality, urban justice, etc. This dialectics of access and exclusion, law and custom, power and protest is one of the defining features of the urban public space. It is in this highly contested space that the art's institutional baggage has been turned inside-out and its sociality is put to test.

The contemporary moment of crisis and insurgence paved the way to the moment of self-representation and self-determination and allowed art to occupy the spaces that politics has so far occupied. Jacques Rancière reminds us: "The more art fills rooms of exhibitions with monumentalized reproductions of the objects and icons of everyday life and commodity culture, the more it goes into the streets and professes to be engaging in a form of social intervention, and the more anticipates and mimics its own effect" (Rancière 2010, p.148). Through unmediated social interaction, public art may lead to greater control over the spatial and social dynamics of the urban space. It can also present us with the possibility of cohesion, sociality and conviviality as desired effects to achieve some degree of social change. This paper discusses why it is important to always take into account the dialectical dimension of the urban space and public art and points to the perils of the 'democratization' of the public space.

2. The contested urban public space

In the time of neoliberal urban redesign and restructuring, when commercial interests gain too much influence over public space, the ultimate result is a destruction of the sense of shared ownership of that space (that it belongs to the people) and erosion of civic identity. Furthermore, public interaction becomes carefully planned, mediated, and commodified. The strategic principles of urban symbolic economies are made up of a fragmented sprawl of communicative signs and symbols that reproduce the dominant socio-political premises and preferred images of the city. Lefebvre identified this as mastering the representational space, imagined, lived and experienced by *citadins*, the urban dwellers (Lefebvre 1996). Urban public spaces are areas for interaction and encounter but also for self-expression, symbolic affirmation and collective construction of the commons. Official and neoliberal discussions of redevelopment claim to provide urban publics with an accessible and participatory public space while they serve to conceal the privatization and bureaucratization of cities and exclude *citadins*—especially the vulnerable communities such as the working class and migrants from real political debates on the future of their neighborhoods and cities (Tunali 2021). As cities have become centers of economic development, services, knowledge and creativity, they have also become places of social polarization, intercultural confrontations, the concentration of poverty, unemployment and environmental problems. The politics of cultural reification can exploit urban aesthetics and public art as a strategy for social exclusion and the management of the class and other social identities. Public art practice is indeed capable of both inclusive involvements and contributing to lived realities of exclusion.

Today, we encounter a variety of forms and practices of artistic creativity in the urban public space such as monuments, statues, street art, graffiti, public performances, community media, billboards, and interactive installations. Public art is not merely art in the urban public space, but art that institutes a public place – a place of interaction and common action among people. In recent years, with the popularity and influence of Lefebvrian space theory, the study of public art has been more concentrated on the issue of social production of space and the re-appropriation of public space. Along with the sociality of human aesthetic experience in the urban public spaces, how this experience is translated into politics has also been an important inquiry. In Lefebvrian space theory, the individual's everyday life is

adapted to the designed urban space. Power relations configure spaces and, in turn, those spaces act upon and shape the actors effective in those relations. For Lefebvre "Space and the political organization of space express social relations but also react back upon them" (Lefebvre 2003, 25).

The possibility and power for people to shape their city is fundamentally a social, political, historical and aesthetic one. In Harvey's discussion, neo-liberal policies commodify and enclose 'commons', e.g. common property, common knowledge and common resources (Harvey 2008). Recent urban social movements suggest that the reversal of this process can be achieved to a degree through occupation and re-appropriation of streets, squares or state buildings. In his much-celebrated book *Rebel Cities: From Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*, Harvey states that, at the heart of the multitudinous diverse urban struggles, there is one collective aim: "to change the world, to change lives and to reinvent the city more after their heart's desire" (Harvey 2012, 25). What Harvey means by this romantic political statement is that to claim power over the process of urbanization entails claiming the power of self-determination over life and the social relations in the city. Elsewhere, Harvey and Potter write that:

> 'the right to the city' is a continuous process shaped by our desire to create a different sociality: The inalienable right to the city rests upon the capacity to force open spaces of the city to protest and contention, to create unmediated public spaces so that the cauldron of urban life can become a catalytic site from which new conceptions and configurations of urban living can be devised and out of which new and less damaging conceptions of rights can be constructed (Harvey and Potter 2009, p. 49).

At the heart of this claim, which both call for and enact a new form of social existence, is the earnest demand for expressive and democratic participation.

3. Antagonisms and dissensus in the spaces of public arts

It is well discussed that public art interacts with and draws attention to often hidden features and qualities of the urban public space and highlights the fact that this is a territory of multiple antagonisms among multiple actors. Recently, there has been a lot of effort from academics, cultural critiques and artists to re-establish the concept of public space as a realm of democratic political debate and public art as work that helps to create this democratic space. For theorists Deutsche, Lefort, Laclau and Mouffe, public space is not a space of consensus, but rather a space of dissent. In their discussions of the political in the urban public space, the mainstream understanding of public art–as art that occupies and designs the urban public space–shifts to an understanding of public art that constitutes urban publics by activating their social capacities and simultaneously engaging them in political debates. Based on this discourse, what is imagined is a plurality of citizen voices and actions that emerge to turn the spectators into conscious agents in the transformation of the public space. Yet, we have also experienced that this recognition of public space and public art as facilitating citizen participation in the urban culture and politics has also been a viable political instrument for municipalities and other governing bodies in the city and social legitimacy of any public space and any public art as 'democratic'.

Public art is always an assertion, a competition for visibility; all the while urban public space is always a place of contestation for power by managing the power of visibility. To be visible is to be known to be recognized, to exist. Recognition is both an internal code within the community of public art practice and the larger social effect sought by the works as acts in public or publically viewable, space. Public art's engagement with the public relies on the redeployments of the dominant image economy and hierarchical distribution of public space on the one hand, and reorganization of what is visible, on the other. This visibility—that is a part of the social symbolic city-life—is often conceived of as conversion or reclamation of public space, or as creative destruc-

tion, wherein wrongly privatized space is returned to its rightful owners (Visconti, Sherry Jr., Borghini and Anderson 2010). For example, unsanctioned public art such as graffiti, and street art, can be seen as moments, gestures, acts of fracture and dissent in the ordinary constructions of the social, moral and spatial order of the city. Yet, if they could have the potential to create an opening in the 'grammar of power' would depend not only on their visibility and dialogical form but their social capacity to make social equality the desired focus of public debate.

Like many of his contemporaries, Rancière thinks of the public space as the social arena where art, individuals and the community come together for a re-composition of the shared sensorium. He uses the concept of 'the police' to describe how power is organized in the public space through institutions and political processes to legitimate the roles and subject positions that people can occupy. According to Rancière, the order of political domination, what he calls 'the police order' always relies on a hierarchical division of the places, roles and functions required in the control of individuals or groups of individuals (Rancière 1995, p. 29, 32, 33). This order of domination is not a top-down imposition on the majority by a few, but it is exercised in the division of space and time that frames our common everyday life. The imposition of the particular sharing of places, roles and functions in the urban public space is also how the *citadin* experience this space and time as "normal" segments of common life. For Rancière, aesthetics is a means of collectivity that forges the entire sensorium of a community by producing a world of audible, visible, exchangeable, communicable, transformable objects, things and experiences. In the configuration of that common social world, 'the police (order)' organizes and commands the distribution of spaces and times, occupations and capacities as a way to create consensus and social hierarchies that make up our perceived social realities, thus it is also an aesthetic order (Ranciere 2010).

For that reason, social resistance as the struggle for space that has been inequitably organized should be at once a political and aesthetic struggle to reinvent new, sensible modes of common spaces, words and appearances. This politicization of ordinary citizens and the reclamation of the

public space of visibility and speech that belong to them paves the way for the democratization of public space. Yet, having the power over visibility and speech is not enough to constitute a democratic and emancipatory public space. For Rancière, emancipatory politics exists "when the natural order of domination is interrupted by the institution of a part of those who have no part" (Rancière 1999, p.11). It is not just how art can do it but to whom art renders it possible, is the main struggle here. Rancière, wants art to reconfigure the sensorium of common life, yet for this art needs to do more than making visible that is made invisible, audible that has been made inaudible—it needs to rearrange the relationships between people and institutions, urban space and citizens. This radical dis- or re-ordering of the social world, which Rancière, names as 'dissensus' is enacted through an aesthetic redistribution that enables different forms of knowledge and different roles and subjectivities to be expressed in the urban space.

Similar to Rancière, Chantal Mouffe insists on moving away from the desire for consensus and instead of recognizing and accommodating antagonism, which necessarily produces pluralism. Mouffe looks at identity in Derridean terms and writes: "the constitution of an identity is always based on excluding something and establishing a violent hierarchy between the resultant two poles–form/matter, essence/accident, black/white, man/woman, and so on" (Mouffe 2005, p.141). Therefore, for Mouffe, antagonism is necessary, for "every identity is relational and [. . .] the condition of existence of every identity is the affirmation of a difference, the determination of an 'other' that is going to play the role of a 'constitutive outside' (Mouffe 2005: 2). She argues that "cultural and artistic practices could play an important role in the agonistic struggle because they are a privileged terrain for the construction of new subjectivities" (Mouffe 2005). Mouffe and Rancière ascribe to art a unique potential to instigate a disruption in the existing sensory and discursive regime and to contest the emergence of hegemonic consensus. While Mouffe uses agonism and disagreement as an essential component in democratizing social conflicts, for Rancière disensuss is more than agonism. Building upon the Aristotelian idea that politics is based upon the human capacity for speaking and discussing publicly, Rancière explains: "Political dissensus is not a discussion between the

speaking people who would confront their interest and values. It is a conflict about who speaks and who does not speak, about what has to be heard as the voice of pain and what has to be heard as the argument on justice" (Bowman and Stamp 2011, p.2).

We already know that the subaltern could speak but in which ways, where and to whom it speaks matter. In the 1990s, we have witnessed how the instrumentalization and spectacularization of the subaltern voices and visuality became the norm of the exhibition spaces. Now, both in the public space and online space (with blogging and social media) there is enough open space for communication expression and visibility. In 1995, Deleuze foresaw that and wrote: "The problem is no longer getting people to express themselves, but providing little gaps of solitude and silence in which they might eventually find something to say. Repressive forces do not stop people from expressing themselves, but rather force them to express themselves. What a relief to have nothing to say, the right to say nothing, because only then is there a chance of framing the rare, or even rarer, the thing that might be worth saying" (Deleuze 1995, p.129). What Deleuze wanted us to understand—even before the purge of social media and hypervisibility and audibility –is the privilege of silence. The privilege to have the space and time to remain in silence and have the freedom of non-speech. When the repressive forces dictate a monophonic discourse, the right to not being visible and audible becomes as radical as the freedom of expression for the construction of autonomous subjectivity. Every open space is not a democratic space and the plurality of voices does not mean a plurality of discourses and political existence.

Democratization of the public space through public arts cannot be achieved by merely facilitating plurality and citizen participation. Both concepts 'participation' and 'plurality' have served either the conservative and neoliberal notions of the public space in which political publics are constructed with the unified interests in the name of 'public good' or have fed into the bourgeois conception of the public space where inclusive urbanity still happens on gender, racial and class grounds. For this reason, we should always be vigilant in recognizing who gets to define and design the public space and public art. We should question, how does public art involve the empowerment of some urban publics and segmentation of others?

In 1981, even before gentrification was established as a concept, Alexander Kluge declared that public space is in fact "a factory for the production of politics" (Kluge 1981). Nancy Fraser warned us three decades ago that in contemporary political discourse, the 'private' and the 'public' "are powerful terms that are frequently deployed to delegitimize some interests, views, and topics and to valorize others ... to restrict the universe of legitimate public contestation" (Fraser 1990, p.73). In her affluent article "Rethinking the Public Sphere," Fraser argued that absorbing the subordinate and the less powerful into a false 'we' in fact, reflect the dominant and the powerful (Fraser 1990, 67). Fraser has been influential since the 1970s with her view that democracy and plural publics require a porous border between civil society and the governmental apparatus and not a surveyed and controlled one. In her much-cited essay, she claimed that even Jürgen Habermas' (1991) definition of 'public sphere' inadvertently reinforces the unfortunate idea that "a system of limited government and laissez-faire capitalism is a necessary precondition for a well-functioning public sphere" (Fraser 1977, p.89). Indeed, Habermas' notion of a public sphere can be understood as an intermediary connector between the state and civil society. In the discourse of 'democratic communities' Fraser's idea of 'counter publics' is still very significant. She unpacks:

> Likewise, under conditions of social equality, the porousness, outer-directedness, and open-mindedness of the publics could promote intercultural communication. After all, the concept of a public presupposes a plurality of perspectives among those who participate within it, thereby allowing for internal differences and antagonisms, and likewise discouraging reified blocs [. . .] All told, then, there do not seem to be any conceptual (as opposed to empirical) barriers to the possibility of a socially egal-

itarian, multi-cultural society that is also a participatory democracy. But this will necessarily be a society with many different publics, including at least one public in which participants can deliberate as peers across lines of difference about policy that concerns them all (Fraser 1990, p. 70).

Democratic communities, as Fraser imagines, do not only debate and improve, but also find new artistic languages and modes of operation that allow for the coexistence of different and constantly competing viewpoints. Can the public spaces in late-capitalist societies allow a public sphere of competing for politics between the one exercised by state apparatus and private domination and the one exalted by 'counter publics' and the anti-capitalist resistance movements? If so, which kind of politics consolidate a public as directly and equally participating agents and which one allows public participation in mere *modus operandi* of institutional design of the urban public space? In what conditions do the contestations between different politics open the way for new forms of public engagement creating 'counter publics' that are resilient to the oppressive practices of exclusion under the veil of participatory parity?

For Rosalyn Deutsche, "the public square remains democratic only insofar as its exclusions [of rival views] are taken into account and open to contestation" (Deutsche 1996, p.289). Deutsche claims that public space is not the unified social entity, It is the site of a dynamic social contest raising issues of authority, control, exclusion and access. Deutsche analyzes the consensus-driven public space as a masculine model that ultimately intends to master difference. As a result, her argument establishes that "public space is produced and structured by conflict" (Deutsche 1996, p.24). For Deutsche, a democratic public space is therefore an 'agonistic' arena that allows for an ongoing contest for audibility and visibility among many adversarial views. Deutsche argues that beyond the ability to be audible and visible it is the ability to question all types of power that is at the heart of our civil rights as free citizens and *citadins*. When this right is threatened, economic, social, technological or environmental consequence, public space loses its functioning as 'belonging to the public'. However, at that very loss, the

opportunity for conflict arises again. While discursive function is lost, the spatial potential for openness and access is not. And art can infiltrate this space and question that dominated space that has been officially ordained as public.

Our cities are filled with public arts that are directly supported by the government for a more democratic city and there are also those artistic projects that confront government-supported public artworks for the 'democratization' of the urban space, but display even more autocratic or exclusionary tendencies. Despite their radical potential, public arts as the consolidator of political publics, do not simply concede the democratization of the public space. These publics can as well be constituted by neoliberal agendas – and even worse authoritarianism. In the light of this critical perspective, another question emerges, what kind of public art can then be appropriate for a democratic public?

Along with these pressing questions that demand urgent answers, we should also consider what kind of public can truly be democratic. A type of public that Iris Marion Young described as "heterogeneous, plural, and playful, [occupying] a place where people witness and appreciate diverse cultural expressions that they do not share and do not fully understand" (Young 1990, p. 237) is the kind of public often desired in the public art discourse and practice. Young articulated the complex diversity, which has replaced the reductive idea of a public, with multiple publics. However, critical attention is needed to understand whether or not these multiple publics can allow the coexistence of diverse political contestations in the urban public space. And also, imperatively, we need to ask, how can the plurality of competing publics be a political and aesthetic reality of the urban public realm in late-capitalist societies?

4. Conclusion
Diversification in socially engaged art, as well as contemporary art's erasure of medium specificity, has prompted artists to establish a more direct dialogue with the public in public spaces. The increasing popularity of public space discourse in contemporary art depends on several factors among which are the occupation of squares in urban social movements and their radical aesthetics, the aestheticization of the urban space for neoliberal urban growth and

renewal, and the spurge of socially engaged public art for citizen participation. People's access to public space and public art has been an important pursuit of artists, cultural workers, NGOs as well as municipalities and policy-makers to achieve some degree of social impact. Thus, it has prompted questions about the instrumentality of art as a tool for hegemonic social policy.

Public art engages the masses through creativity, originality and beauty in the urban space and creates a particular sociality. All this allows it to overcome its function as privileged activity of privileged some and as such gives it the responsibility to inactivate the hegemonic sensory-social order in the urban public space. Either opening up to a consensual and universal perspective of reflection or a dissensual and conflictual form of public opinion, the aesthetic contestations over the democratization of the public space are decisive in both the role and function of public art.

Public space can be a system of places with a precisely defined urban functionality, or it can be a shared space created by people who appropriate it. Thus, public space is the place of both consolidations of power and political subjectivities. The creative and spatial dynamics of the urban space offer us a multi-dimensional perspective to analyze how the dominant modes of power are reproduced and how the marginalized are kept outside the spaces of the performance of power. It can also allow us to recognize and understand public art's dialectical relationship to the 'democratization' of the urban public space both as an instrument to help produce a public space and as a social practice that contests the dominating ideology in that space.

This paper discussed that public art functions dialectically between the aesthetic experience of the public realm by agonistic agents and the framing of a political subjectivization. It proposed to rethink the link between critical visual practices in the urban public spaces and democratic engagement to better understand what kind of publics public art can create and to what ends. It also wished to address the need for a more sustained knowledge and multidisciplinary understanding of what art and artists can do to create democratic spaces, forms and languages in a world devastated by multiple crises.

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