

University of Pécs, Doctoral School of the Faculty of Music and Visual Arts

**Dóra Palatinus**

# **The changing role of art in public spaces**

*Artistic approaches of public space as a societal space*

DLA thesis

Supervisor

*István Bencsik* sculptor, Professor Emeritus

Theoretical consultant:

*László Kertész* art historian

2014

My paper wishes to showcase public art in Hungary and in an international context, focusing primarily on public art-related activities.

The choice of topic was inspired by questions which were raised in connection with my own art works realised in or planned for a public space. I was interested, first and foremost in the possibilities of visual arts in a public space, its goals and functions and operational mechanisms. The gradual spreading of the democratic approach, the conflicts and fragmentation that manifests itself in public spaces, the differentiated interpretations of publicity through the tools of expression of fine arts. In an ideal case, public space is born through a delicate balance between the various conflicts, variegation, and equality – how can art support this process? What local and unique communities and publics can be represented in a public space?

Of the wide scope of public space-related activities I have laid emphasis primarily on those works which have focussed on the ever-forming and changeable nature of public spaces. Public space is not merely an easily and boundlessly accessible space as understood by physics, but a place that is formed by varying economical, political and societal energies, in which public art appears as an artistic activity motivated by the public. 'Public art' covers an extremely wide artistic category; according to Rosalind Deutsch, art historian: „...we cannot exactly define what public art is, or what it should be <...>. The notion lacks clear and lucid definitions.”<sup>1</sup>

My paper can be divided into three major parts. The first part deals with defining public art, and with the historical and methodological approaches of this process. Of several interpretations I refer to two authors: Miwon Kwon's *One Place After Another: Site Specific Art and Locational Identity* (2002); and the Suzanne Lacy-edited book, *Mapping the Terrain* (1995). The first book undertook the critical and historical processing of 35 years' worth of public art interventions, the second one summarizes „new genre public art”: more recent forms of public art. According to the division established by Kwon, we may observe three different paradigms of public art, the motor of which is first of all the support- and financial system that has led to the taking into account of further and further city developmental aspects and the ever-more democratic presence of public interest.

The categories that the author has laid down are representative mainly of the public arts activity found in the U.S., however, understood in a wider spectrum, these may be partly utilised when examining Hungary's efforts in this field too.

---

<sup>1</sup>Deutsch, Rosalyn: *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics*. Cambridge, Mass.–London, The MIT Press. 1996. 279.p.

In her 1991 book, Suzanne Lacy categorised under new genre public art those works which are – contrary to the above mentioned mainstream, the dominant public space art – based on a dedication to society. The original notion of public art referred to statues, installations placed in public spaces, but new genre public art (ngpa) dealt with concrete communities and groups of society and the questions directly related to them, whilst looking for the possibilities of communication and co-operation.

In The United States, the latest genre of public art was born in the Sixties, when, in the framework of city- and property developmental plans works of art were commissioned with an aim at democratically distributing cultural goods, and at showcasing art that is accessible to everyone. The intention of this top-down managed art to serve the „public good” and to form public taste did not meet the needs and expectation of the cities’ inhabitants, so that commissioned public art became more and more focussed on local factors and locality: it became a location- and society-specific direction of art. It emphasized the importance of the fact that the city space is in a close interrelativity with the societal environment, and that public art can be an important tool in revitalisation – something essential in societal life...

Kwon divides this process into three different stages, differentiating between the eras 'art in public spaces', 'art as public space' and 'art in the public interest'. The first period of public art was the appearance of modernist sculpture in public spaces (during this time, the notion of public art and sculpture in public spaces meant the same thing), the second model represents a transition between architecture, landscape architecture and visual arts, whilst the third model is based primarily on co-operation, resulting in works that reflect on local, special phenomena.

The recognition of the interaction between space and art work, and art work and perceiver was, at first reflected in the minute analysis of physical space, and later – expanding the notion of space – in the examination of the spatial projection of societal relations. This has all led to the formation of new categories in art, and in the meantime, the basic notion of public art has gone through a process of intense differentiation, all the whilst attracting several new artistic phenomena into its circle of influence.

The developmental history of commissioned public art met the artistic programmes of the Sixties and Seventies striving to carve new paths, which approached the public by examining the forms of co-operation within the community, placing societal questions, political stance and activism in the forefront of their struggles. Artist groups of varying ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and individual artists have defined their own artistic activities with

the help of a new notion. Distancing itself from the early meaning of this term (public art: sculptures and environmental pieces in public spaces) has denoted an artistic practice which sets out to render visible the specificities, the problems and underrepresented topics of society.

In my thesis I deal with the notion of local specificity separately, as a method that is strongly connected to public art. In connection to the interpretation of public art works Miwon Kwon differentiates between three different types of local specificity: phenomenological, institutional and discursive. The categories that have been born due to the extension of the meaning of „place” are not presented as the result of a lineal historical development, but rather as notions simultaneously overlapping each other. Under phenomenological local specificity Kwon understands the case when the creation itself has an inseparable connection to the location and integrates the specific physical characteristics and possibilities of the environment into the work of art. The critique of institutions has expanded the conceptual, notional interpretation of place, questioning the phenomenological understand of location (based on physical perception), and, contrary to the innocence of the place, has interpreted the exhibition space as a location sensitive to cultural, societal and political mechanisms. Discursive local specificity doesn't denote a spatial category, and is not a pre-defined physical prerequisite; it is characterised by the work itself creating the place.

The second larger part of my thesis deals with Hungarian public art. Due to the unique circumstances the Hungarian practice has taken special forms when compared with American and Western European public art practice; its creation and flowering are rooted in different traditions also. It differs from the expression used in an American context insofar that it totally distances itself from the traditional forms of public art, from official and representative sculpture. Hungarian public art can, in many cases be regarded as an answer, a reaction with its dialogic openness, its project-like, temporary actions as opposed to the static characteristics of sculpture in public spaces, which are projections of the relations of power. In a professional context, Hungarian public art is often closely linked to the traditional possibilities of sculpture in public spaces, with commissions by the state and by serving political-ideological contents.

Due to the unique historical situation, the socially sensitive direction played a leading role within Hungarian public art, since it proved to be an adequate tool in substituting social-political, socially sensitive or politically committed art after 1989. During the socialist regime due to the lack of democracy, public art works which function in a societal space could not come into being; works of art which were different from those made for state

commissions could often be created illegally only. After the fall of the regime, reinterpreting Hungarian art in public spaces was initiated mainly through the art institutional system, calls for applications, and curators – in Hungary, public art per se was born in the Nineties. Similarly to the interpretations of the American and Western notion of public art, here we may also not talk about a canonised definition. A consensus of some sorts may be found in the following: an artistic activity based on interaction and striving to establish a more direct communication and a more a conscious relationship with the audience.

Nowadays, we can examine the tendency to incorporate public art approaches into city developmental strategies aimed at reinterpreting the role of public spaces. Creative contemporary artistic programmes that understand the city as a communicational platform, as the platform of social and societal interactions, are given an increasingly large role in the formation of these concepts. However, due to their specificity, the form and nature of the artistic projects aimed at a dialogue with the public and at co-operation are extremely diversified.

The last major chapter is dedicated to the most dominant and most problematic genre of public art works: memorials. It seems that, independent of the various genres of contemporary art that use public spaces, the traditional functions of art in public spaces remain unchanged; the representative, symbolic and collective content and the pretenses linked to these have not ceased to exist.

András Rényi, aesthete perceives the memorial as an organ of the collective-societal memory, as a symbolic object that marks out uniquely important point in the geographical space or a uniquely important moment in historical time, and connects these in the form of a sculpturesque symbol, and offers it up to the community. It serves to become a durable pillar, a point of reference for the memory of a society, nation, community defined geographically or historically.

The primary function of memorials is to bring about a feeling of a shared history, to uphold events, common experiences, memories. However, a public space is in correspondence with the history of the present, with the given societal and political ideology, so that first and foremost every memorial is shaped by the political relations and, in turn, serves those. That is to say: the sculptures reproduce the forces that have created them. In the case of democratic state systems, national policy of memory is realised by taking account of the needs of society. If politics starts to exclude the possibility of intervention by society, the possibility of consensus, less and less differentiated points of view are given space, and the distorted expectations of politics predominate.

In Hungary, the most expressive example of removing political memorials on a large scale was seen after the fall of the Iron Curtain. From 1996 on, memorials of new topics (the 1956 revolution, WWII, Millennial, Settlement of the Magyars) replaced the old monuments, and even today we are witness to this compulsion to erect historical memorials and memorial portraits.

According to Pierre Nora, reexamining and reinterpreting the tradition of the memorial is of crucial importance in the postsocialist countries of Europe. The disappearance of the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century – Communism, Nazism, or other dictatorships - offers favourable conditions for these recently liberated societies to rediscover their long-term, traditional memory which had been appropriated, destroyed or falsified by these regimes. It was in the Eighties that the critical point of view regarding the role of art became predominant, which stated that the traditional blueprints for a memorial do not offer a sufficient visual framework for processing the trauma (following Auschwitz and Hiroshima, the nature of remembrance has changed; many regard the Holocaust as having been a turning point, others regard it as the most terrible phase of an already ongoing process). In the case of traumatic and widespread events, the urging task of processing these seems of singular importance. The societal-political blows that were perceived personally, and the relative proximity of the widely experienced historical events have fundamentally changed the image of visual representation of the memory of wars.

In his paper „The Texture of Memory”, James E. Young calls the recent examples of memorial-building „anti-memorials”, referring to a novel type of memorials that was born at the end of the 1980s in Germany. In order not to be reduced merely to a spatial element, these new memorials give up their striving for constant presence, their formal and conceptual immobility in order to generate psychic and mental processes. They attempt to actualise the common values and memories through communicative processes and individual interaction. In many cases they concentrate on the process of creation; they do not dominate space, but have, instead locked themselves in or subjugate themselves to the place: they are memorials which we may enter and may become temporary parts of.

In his writing, Jochen Gerz sets out to render remembrance alive again, so that the place of memorials may become the human memory itself. The place of memory is thus displaced from the material space of the memorial into the metaphysical space of thoughts and emotions arising in the participants, so that the effect it generates is transformed from that of one being experienced to that of one lived. According to James E. Young: „now our task is

not to examine whether this is good or bad art, but to see how it affects people”<sup>2</sup>, what role it takes in upholding memory, what acts and thoughts it generates, what reactions it triggers, so that the aesthetic prowess of a work may be primarily measured in its effect on the public and in its function.

Several types of works erected in public spaces strive to create interaction, enable participation and communication. Whether they have, as goal, the creation of identity, the creation of a collective memory, the pointing out of various societal problems, public thinking, the expression of differing opinions, or simply the experience of community, they generate meeting points whose primary objective is to enable the establishment of contact. To quote Jochen Gerz, the work itself can be defined as an interval between people, as a connection, and works in public spaces define the framework in which these meetings may take place.

From the self-referencing examination of art emerged further examinations of the economical, political contexts of public space and of publicity, and the novel approaches focusing on increasingly special and local situations, circumstances and communities gave birth to several new artistic idioms, redefining the notions of beholder, of author, of the role of the artist, and of the possibility of self-definition.

---

<sup>2</sup> Young, James E.: The Texture of Memory, *Múlt és Jövő*, 2003/4. 44. p.

## Literature

- Deutsche, Rosalyn (1996) *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics*. Cambridge, Mass.–London, The MIT Press. 279p,
- Kwon, Miwon (2002): *One Place After Another*, MIT Press, London
- Kwon, Miwon (2012): Egyik helyet a másik helyett. Megjegyzések a helyspecifikusságról. A gyakorlattól a diszkurzusig. Kortárs művészetelméleti szöveggyűjtemény. (*One Place After Another. Notes on local specificity. From practise to discourse. Contemporary art theory papers.* Edited by: Zoltán Kékesi, Eszter Lázár, Tünde Varga, János Szoboszlai, Budapest, Hungarian University of Fine Arts, Department of Fine Art Theory
- Lacy, Suzanne (1995): *Mapping The Terrain. New Genre Public Art*, Bay Press, Los Angeles.
- Nora, Pierre (2007): Emlékezetdömping. (Torrent of memory) *Magyar Lettre Internationale*, 66. 35-37.
- Perczel, Júlia: Egy induló közösség margójára (To the margins of a new community) [http://www.publicart-eica.hu/muvek/belso\\_vilagunk.117.html?pageid=11](http://www.publicart-eica.hu/muvek/belso_vilagunk.117.html?pageid=11) (2013.11.29.)
- Rényi, András (2002): A légből kapott monumentum. (The moment from thin air) *Mozgó Világ*, 2000/2.
- Young, James E. (2003): Az emlékezet szövete (The fabric of memory). *Enigma*. 37-38. 171-196.