# Placing Art
# In the Public Realm

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Södertörns högskola

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The following texts were originally presented at the symposium *Placing Art in the Public Realm,* which was held at Konstfack University College of Arts, Crafts and Design in August 2007. The symposium, a joint venture between Konstfack and Södertörn University, inaugurated the masters program *Art in the Public Realm,* and was funded by the National Research Foundation. It was organized by Professor Måns Wrange (Konstfack) and Håkan Nilsson, Lecturer at Konstfack and Södertörn University, with support from several colleagues, most notably Professor Marysia Lewandowska and Andrea Creutz, Lecturer, both of whom are at Konstfack.

   *Placing Art in the Public Realm* revolved around questions of art and research, without making a clear distinction between the two. Some of the speakers are academics who research art and/or the public realm, while others are artists who use art as a means of researching the public realm.

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# Introduction

Håkan Nilsson

When planning for the symposium *Placing Art in the Public Realm,* where the following texts were first presented, we posed a number of general questions about the changing role of the public sphere today. Is it shrinking due to commercialization and gentrification of the city proper? What kinds of restrictions, if any, can be placed on advertisements and other commercial expressions in communally shared spaces? Or is the public sphere forever invaded by the commercial, perhaps even lost to it, or simply consigned to the past, as Jürgen Habermas suggested in his 1962 classic *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*?[1]

As people meet with greater frequency, keep contact and network in virtual environments, the functioning of social media and other parts of the Internet challenge the public realm in new and entirely different ways. How should traditional public spheres be understood in relation to other kinds of spaces? Is it meaningful or even possible to tell them apart, or should these new spaces rather be understood as an expansion of the public sphere, offering us a more complex and multifaceted public realm? If so, what remains of the "public?" If commercial forces pose a threat to the traditional public sphere, shrinking it and limiting people's abilities to move and act freely, the opposite

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[1] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* 1962 (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989).

could be said of the relatively new spheres of media. Since social media are, to a large extent, the product of commercial companies, expansion and commercialization of the municipal paradoxically seem to go hand in hand.

Indeed, the current trend may even be that the traditional public sphere is developing in the same direction as the social media, rather than the other way around. Private companies are taking over and assuming responsibilities in the public realm—to such extent that it is getting increasingly difficult to tell them apart. One response to this development was the art project *Nikeground* (2003) by Eva and Franco Mattes (aka 0100101110101101.ORG), in which they placed an information kiosk on Karlsplatz in Vienna. The artists pretended that the kiosk was run by Nike, declaring that the company had bought the entire square and that they would be renaming it *Nikeplatz*. Of course, there was also a new website constructed to celebrate the concocted event.[2]

In turn, asking questions about the public sphere immediately leads to broader questions of power. Who has the right to speak in the public realm? How are we to communicate freely in an environment that is already governed primarily by commercial interests? Is a rational debate even possible in a place where business sets the agenda, or are we slowly (for instance in social media), losing the ability to speak even as we gain new possibilities to meet?

The American art group Critical Art Ensemble offered another take on the (diminished) importance of the public sphere and its relationship to new media when, as early as in 1994, they concluded that computer networks render power nomadic. The implication is that some types of public expression, such as demonstrations, are diminishing in importance since economic and political power simply is not there to be confronted anymore. The CAE argued that "Nomadic power must be resisted in cy-

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[2] For details about the project, see:
http://0100101110101101.org/home/nikeground/index.html

berspace rather than in physical space," which in turn suggests that we must think of media as part of the public sphere, lest its importance in forming the communal be reduced.[3]

Another crucial concern is how the contemporary subject influences the public. This follows the thinking of Henri Lefebvre, who as early as in the 1970s argued that the spaces of everyday life cannot be seen as either abstract or stable entities. Instead they must be understood as *lived,* meaning they are not only produced; they themselves actively produce the subjects that inhabit them. "(*Social) space is a (social) product,"* wrote Lefebvre.[4] Thus the public sphere, which exists only if it is also a social space, both produces and gets produced by the same forces that produce the subject.

Discussion of the public sphere as a kind of paradise lost runs through the writings of many theorists discussed in this book. However, as many have also pointed out, the contemporary public sphere is not only altered by changes in this "sphere" as such. The "plurality" of the public sphere also includes aspects of what it means to be a subject today. If the bourgeois public sphere was crucial for the development of the modern subject, as Habermas pointed out, what sphere(s) construct contemporary subjectivity? Indeed, how are we to think about the notion of public sphere from a global perspective? How can we understand the relationship between public and private when comparing small cities in Europe with the overpopulated megapolises of the world, a question that is reflected in Shudda Sengupta's text in this volume, where he describes how private life and public places merge in Delhi?

The plurality and co-existence of both public subjects and public spheres seem to call for negotiation between radically

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[3] Critical Art Ensemble, "Nomadic Power and Cultural Resistance" in *The New Media Reader* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: The MIT Press, 2003) p. 788.

[4] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 2005) p. 26 (italics in original)

different standpoints. Chantal Mouffe, a political scientist who draws on the thinking of German philosopher Carl Schmitt, uses the term "agonistic pluralism," which she defines as stressing "… the importance of acknowledging its conflictual dimension."[5] This seems to suggest quite a different role for art in the public realm than what we are used to. Throughout history, public art has been used to celebrate leaders or, as during modernism, to promote a new, enlightened subject. In any case, it has been employed to serve prevailing political interests. Stressing agonism and multiplicity, of course, does not require art to be in conflict with the dominant ideology, but it does make its *raison d'être* quite different.

Of course, one could argue that politically driven, critical art practice is as old as modernism. When Gustave Courbet—who is often described as the first modern artist—partook in the iconoclastic destruction of the Napoleon column during the Paris Commune in 1871, he was arguably drawing the natural conclusion regarding what the contemporary artist could do—that is, engage directly in a political action. Indeed the year before, Courbet published an open letter in several newspapers, in which he argued that art must follow the logic of the revolution: "Today, when democracy directs everything, it would be illogical for art, which leads the world, to lag behind in the revolution that is taking place in France at this moment." Still, it is hardly likely that Courbet saw the destruction of the monument as an artistic action. As James H. Rubin has shown, the events at Place Vendôme did not follow Courbet's logic concerning an "orderly" destruction, nor was he directly involved in the decision to actually destroy the monument.[6] Thus, while art did indeed become political in a new, critical way with the advent of modernism, political actions were still not necessarily art.

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[5] Chantal Mouffe, "Deliberate Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism" in *Political Science Series* (Institute for Advanced Studies, Vienna: 72/2000), p. 14.

[6] James H Rubin, *Courbet* (London, Phaidon Press: 1997) p 278; Courbet quote on p. 276.

And it would take another century before critical art became accepted as commissioned public art.

Modernism's quest for the enlightened subject seems not to have encouraged Chantal Mouffe's "conflictual dimension." The rhetoric of progress seems capable of pointing in only one direction: forward. From a public art point of view, this aim supported a synthesis of various art forms. Ideally, architecture, painting and sculpture could speak a common language, that of progress and development, and they could thus reflect each other—not in competition but in cooperation. As appealing as this search for synthesizing the art forms might seem, there are, as postmodernists remind us, quite a few troubling aspects as well. Aesthetically, it seems to promote one particular look, while it tends to "forget" about political questions altogether. The wholeness of the new era would not offer opportunities to infinity; rather, it turns into totalitarianism, to borrow the terminology of philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas, whose ethics require not that we hope to understand "the other" from our limited preconceptions, but to embrace him/her in all possible aspects."It is not the insufficiencies of the I that prevent totalization," he wrote, "but the Infinity of the Other."[7]

While modernist urban planning opted for a whole, including ideas and ideals about a synthesis of the arts, contemporary practice is often best understood as counter-discursive. It creates singular art works that might be expected to bite the hand that feeds them. In certain cases, such disloyalty might even be required; agonism, indeed democracy itself, may depend on it. Chantal Mouffe often returns to the theme of how political striving towards a center threatens democracy. It is as if the long tradition of consensus politics that has governed Swedish political life for decades effectively cancelled out all the political questions and did away with conflicts, thereby making political debate less interesting. Understood this way, the threat to

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[7] Emmanuel Lévinas, Totality and Infinity (Kluwer Academic Publisher, Dordreht: 1991), p. 80.

the public sphere does not solely stem from commercialization. Another, equally dangerous hazard comes from the inability to form a "radical democratic" alternative.

Following theorists such as Mouffe, Hannah Arendt and Ernesto Laclau, the conflict and the confrontation with our fellow beings in the public sphere might be just what makes the public sphere "public," and keeping it thus might also be a way to promote and salvage democracy. This has also been on the agenda of contemporary art in recent decades, forming a social "turn" where artists work less with aesthetic objects and focus instead on the direct contact with audiences; this is the "freeing-up of inter-human communication," as curator and theorist Nicolas Bourriaud wrote in his highly influential *Relational Aesthetics* some ten years ago.[8]

Although Bourriaud has been widely criticized for taking a naïve position on how to include the beholder and what this participation might mean, much public-oriented contemporary art touches upon questions raised by relational aesthetics. However, as the critique against relational aesthetics reminds us, meeting the other is not necessarily the same as respecting or understanding the other. As Jennifer González points out, playing with "otherness" such as by identity swapping, made possible by new media, is not enough. A true meeting includes a deeper challenge than taking a temporary vacation in what seems to be another person's life. One must meet the Face, to cite Lévinas again. The public sphere is arguably the most natural place for such encounters.

A discussion of what it means to place art in the public realm must include juridical and ethical aspects; it must ask what the public is and for whom it exists. Such a debate must also, as Nina Möntmann suggests for the art institution, reflect upon what it means to educate the audience; making them prepared for an art

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[8] Nicolas Bourriaud, Relational Aesthetics (Presses du réel, Paris: 2002), p. 60.

that will not be satisfied with merely being aesthetic. We hope that the texts in this volume can contribute to such a discussion.

All the texts in this volume discuss the role of the public sphere in contemporary society not as a place for reaching consensus, but rather as a venue for conflict. Put another way, it is a place where conflicting interests are allowed to clash with each other without either position being granted a preferential interpretation. This would be a place, reasons Sven-Olov Wallenstein in a discussion on Chantal Mouffe, where antagonism transforms into "agonism." Wallenstein points to differences between Mouffe's idea of the public sphere as a constitutive plurality and more traditional ideas about the public sphere as a singular identity (as understood by Kant and Habermas), which leads him into discussing the "subjectification" that takes place in the public sphere. Wallenstein argues that this division has less to do with empirical facts and more to do with two competing ideas of what constitutes philosophical and political rationality as such, and that it also engages two distinct models of what it means to be a subject. Following Foucault, Wallenstein traces the origins of differences in public spheres in the conflicted genesis of the subject itself.

Catharina Gabrielsson discusses the "rhetoric of loss" that has dominated discourse concerning the public realm, and argues that idealism is in fact essential to the imagination of public space. Rethought, and reconstructed, it can give public space a new sense of purpose and generate new spatial practices that are important for democratic societies. As the ideal citizen turns increasingly into a consumer, she argues, it should come as no surprise that the public sphere becomes transformed into something akin to a shopping mall. Following Bruno Latour, Gabrielsson argues that the central question concerns that which is brought into the public sphere, for instance before a council where you present different standpoints. Public space is a medium for shared reality, as Hannah Arendt had it. But if the public sphere is to be a venue for appearances, for what is

visible and invisible, then it must be conceived via metaphors other than "the living room," which currently dominates urban planning. "The living room" tends to make place for one subject only: the middle-class consumer. However, shifting the focus from "public" to "common," makes that sphere less a question of interaction between private individuals and more one of active co-dependency.

Jennifer González discusses the role of race and confronts visions of the Internet as a utopian public sphere, where gender and race cease to matter. Although the Internet makes "real" bodies invisible, it cannot produce either racially neutral space or neutral subjects. González follows Stuart Hall, who argues that race is a discourse where visibility is but one factor. Playing with roles, what Lina Nakamura has described as "identity tourism," produces stereotypes of race, rather than obliterating them. González therefore questions experiments that have opted for attempting to understand what it means to be the other through simple transformation of the "face," that is, becoming the other in a game, and argues instead that art confronts us with whatever preconception we might have of each other. The works by Keith Piper, Mongrel, and other artists addressing racial differences reveal the degree to which a complex negotiation takes place between "the face" of the subject and the domain of the "public." The goal can never be, as the writings of Giorgio Agamben suggest, a universal singularity. Instead, González follows Emmanuel Lévinas, who grounds the possibility of ethnic encounters through difference. The text thus assesses the degree to which "the face" and "the public" form intersecting but potentially conflicting frameworks for understanding racial formations in contemporary digital art practice, both on- and off-line.

Shuddhabrata Sengupta points to how public spaces and private acts collide in New Delhi. On the one hand the public sphere constrains the possibility for private acts by governing social behavior, where both Islamic and Hindu extremists have (ironically enough) adopted European heteronormative pru-

dency. On the other hand, the street literally serves not only as a private living room, but also as bedroom and kitchen for the multitudes lacking a physical home. The display of grief becomes a focal point for the public-private conundrum as Sengupta recounts the clashes between Shia and Sunni Muslims during the Shia moharram processions.

Nina Möntmann looks at art institutes as a part of the public realm. Tracing their roots to the birth of the modern museum in the eighteenth century, Möntmann recounts how the museum educated the model citizen with a nationalistic narrative. Museums today, however, she argues, seem to promote a mass of anonymous consumers, due to the economic pressure to attract as many people as possible with a populist program and deliver a hefty visitor count to sponsors and politicians. Opposing this concept of an anonymous mass of consumers is a desire shared by many curators to produce new publics and connect their programs to these newly formed communities, where diversity and dissonance function as positive values. Here Möntmann discusses several institutions from around the world that have tried to follow research-based practice rather than the corporate strategies that otherwise seem to be dominating the contemporary scene.

Jacob Kimvall takes on the vexing question of graffiti in the public realm, focusing on the removal of such paintings as acts of iconoclasm. Here Kimvall follows David Freedberg, who discusses iconoclasm in relation to power, to symbolic as well as real violence. By comparing graffiti to its close cousin street art, Kimvall notes how the latter is usually seen as interesting (even if illicit) inventions in the public realm, while the former is considered destructive and ugly and elicits frequent calls for immediate removal. By discussing various examples of graffiti and street art, Kimvall shows how the latter belongs to "us," while the former belongs to "them." Only when siding with the "us," as when conveying explicitly patriotic messages, does graffiti avoid immediate destruction.

Finally, Cecilia Sjöholm discusses the notion of public space and its place in Hannah Arendt's ontology. Arendt has been criticized for basing this notion on a consensual model, disregarding the political importance of dissensus. To Arendt, the public sphere is a place where reality is negotiated, which makes reality a product of plurality. Plurality is constituted by humans, but this in itself does not make it essentially human, argues Sjöholm. Rather, it is the in-between that brings about the individuation of human beings. Taking Arendt's idea of the public realm as the space in which truth and un-truth become a point of departure, Sjöholm then discusses the terrorism of the Red Army Faction (RAF) and in particular how it is interpreted in films by Margarethe von Trotta. Here, the terrorist is presented not only against an historical background, but is also connected to how subjectivity is produced. In this double perspective, the legitimacy of the modern nation state is put into question and the question of consensus or dissensus made irrelevant. What matters is the "making real" of reality, concludes Sjöholm, the differentiation of individuals and objects that thereby appear.

# Public Subjects

Sven-Olov Wallenstein

What is the origin of public space, why does it exert such a hold on our political imagination, and why do we so often perceive it as being threatened to the point of extinction? Throughout its history, the concept of public space has seemed fraught with insecurities. It represents at once the promise of a more transparent social order where undistorted intellectual exchange is possible, and something to which we are *exposed*, a space in which we are subjected to the gaze or the voice of *another* that draws us out of ourselves. Here I will tell three stories. The first one could be called the rise and decline of public space, and is the most common one; the second concerns public space as something that is structurally defined by a conflict that will turn it into a battle zone, and where the dream of undistorted communication is but a sweet lie that cloaks the reality of power. The third and final one is not about overcoming the conflict, but attempts to unearth something like the common root of the first two. This will hardly be a solution but a genealogical account of the problem that, hopefully, allows us to see it a bit clearer.

### I. The rise and fall of public space

Most reconstructions of the genealogy of this concept piously point to its origin in the *agora*, the central place in the Greek *polis*, whose symbolic value resonates throughout Western histo-

ry. It is important to bear in mind that this space is an idealized and ideological construction, indeed a kind of retroactive fantasy: Greek public life comprised only free men, and it excluded slaves, metoics, and women. This notwithstanding, it still captures the political imagination, primarily because it was in this form that it was rediscovered by Rousseau, and through him transmitted to a whole spectrum of small-scale visions of modernity; it represented the promise of a restored *Gemeinschaft*, a community seemingly without representation. This vision was relayed—to some extent contradicted, but on another level reinforced—by the emergence of an "ideal" public space during the latter half of the eighteenth century, a world of rational reflection, communication, and judgement that we find outlined in the writings of Kant. This was a vision of the Enlightenment as a forum where all dogmas, theoretical as well as moral and political, can be subjected to a debate open to anyone who is willing to act as a "public" person and not as bearer of official authority (such as the judge, the magistrate or the priest). This is the reason why Kant can say "Reason as much as you want, but obey!"—a statement that has occasioned many ironical remarks, but in fact simply means that whoever acts as a figure of public authority must go by the book, as it were, in order to ensure what Kant in another texts calls a certain "mechanism of society," that is the predictability of courts, magistrates and legal processes. And while this obedience does not exclude critical reflection ("reason as much as you want"), it only tells us that such reasoning belongs to another form of discourse than the one endowed with public authority.

For Kant, this process of reflection is necessarily open-ended. We are living in an age of *enlightenment*, Kant stresses, but it is not an *enlightened* age: enlightenment must be understood as a process where ideas and arguments are presented publicly, addressed to a "world of readers" (*eine Leserwelt*), as he says in the preface to the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* from 1781. If this process were to coalesce into a theory, into a stance,

it would become a dogma, and reasoning would come to an end. Whoever says of himself "I am enlightened" ceases in the same moment to be enlightened.

The collective nature of this process for Kant depends on the "maturing capacity for judgment" of the period, which makes it all the more essential for each of us to attempt to "think in the place of everyone else," as he later will say in the *Critique of Judgment*. The process of reflection is the ongoing creation of intersubjectivity as an exchange of perspectives; as such it always places us in a present that responds to the past at the same moment that it projects a possible future.

This temporal dimension also comes to the fore in other parts of Kant's political philosophy, where he talks of the impact of empirical history (notably the French Revolution) on philosophy, and introduces the concept "sign of history" (*Geschichtszeichen*), which incidentally can also be read as a theory of a certain type of public art or, even better, as the outline of a *logic of monumentality*. In the second part of his *The Conflict of Faculties*, Kant debates with the faculty of law whether we can find proofs of historical progress or not, and he proposes that we should not look for any empirical facts that would verify the existence of an improved moral disposition in man, but instead we should attempt to locate signs that act as indirect presentations, or "hypotyposes"—with the French Revolution being his paradigmatic case. The sign of history will have a tripartite form: it is a *signum rememorativum, demonstrativum et prognosticon:* there has always *been* (sign of memory, re-memoration), there *is* (a demonstrative sign, indicating a case that appears to verify the hypothesis), and there *will be* (prediction, prognosis) signs of progress that establish the hopeful continuity of history, a constant tendency toward improvement. For Kant, the French Revolution is such a sign of historical progress, although not through its violent effects. A utilitarian calculus weighing losses and gains, for instance in human lives, could in fact lead us to say that we would have been better off had the revolution never occurred, although this

is not the point. The value of the revolution does not lie in its factual success or failure, but in the change in affectivity it produces among its spectators, what Kant calls "enthusiasm."[1] Since the spectators—in this case, the Germans—stand outside the pathological effects of the event (they have nothing to gain by acting like the furious actors on the stage of history, but in fact everything to lose in their own country), their enthusiasm will be directed toward pure moral principles, and it indicates a receptivity to ideas (*eine Empfänglichkeit für Ideen*) hitherto unknown in history.

We can see how this drama is organized by the divide between stage and audience, which also indirectly points to the rather complex relationship between aesthetics and politics that is always assumed by Kant, but never really clarified. The political becomes sensible to us like an aesthetic effect, although politics as such can never be reduced to a mere aesthetic phenomenon. Enthusiasm and the signs that convey it remain ambivalent, as do the monuments that embody them.

For Kant, the revolution is a not sign of an empirical event, which together with the corresponding element of enthusiasm indicates a permanent historical possibility—even though the actual revolution could well derail, or lead to a restoration. In the same way, the process of Enlightenment is i*deally speaking* irreversible and can never be undone, all temporary setbacks notwithstanding. The function of the monument in this context would be to preserve this sign: to incarnate and provide it with an outward permanence that will underwrite the hopeful continuity of history. Through its permanent material presence, it insists on the present and orients the spectator to affectivity, while through its function as an idealized sign it points ahead to the ideal content that still remains to be actualized. The monument is part of historical semiotics, the outwardly visible form of the speculative narrative (Hegel's mistake, Kant could perhaps

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[1] See the lucid commentary by Jean-François Lyotard, *L'enthousiasme. La critique kantienne de l'histoire* (Paris: Galilée, 1986).

argue, is that he attempts to unify these two aspects, to reduce the necessary inner distance of the "hypotyposis," and thus collapses the political and the aesthetic into one another). This particular example, the "sign of history," shows the complexity and multi-dimensionality of the process that produces consensus through reflection. Kant proposes many such alternative models, and it is far from clear how they are connected. The *Critique of Political Reason* was indeed never written, and Lyotard suggests this reflects the nature of the things themselves: the open-ended quality of reflective judgment, which begins in taste and is then projected into politics, forbids any clear-cut *a priori* principles.

This idea of a rational community based on arguments has been thoroughly analyzed by Jürgen Habermas as the mediated place where society constitutes itself through debate and reflection, as an open-ended process of legitimization and production of a consensus that no longer acknowledges the decrees issued by a sovereign power. This is the forging of a modern political space, with Kantian criticism and the French Revolution as the two founding moments—or in Claude Lefort's term, this would be something like the "democratic invention" or the "invention of democracy," where the subject that speaks (the "people") is the very subject to be brought forth in this discourse, via a kind of political performativity that hollows out the theological and/or ontological foundation of politics: there is *politics* because there is no longer any *foundation*, and in this sense modern democratic societies are based upon a constitutive void and absence.[2] Habermas is reluctant to draw this conclusion, which explains his emphasis on the "transcendental" status of his theory of communication (which also emerges in what at least I see as his

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[2] Their philosophical differences notwithstanding, Lefort's and Habermas' discussions provide two complimentary versions, which both amount to a narrative of the emergence of political freedom as connected to a space of public life; cf. *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit: Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Luchterhand: Neuwied, 1962), and *L'invention démocratique. Les limites de la domination totalitaire* (Paris: Fayard, 1981).

rather spurious use of Wittgenstein: language as gaming surely cannot be formalized into a set of rules, since the very idea of "following a rule" is indeterminate, as we can see in the discussion that followed Saul Kripke's critical remarks on this topic).

This communicative space, however, is necessarily also conceived as being *under attack*. The somewhat pessimistic conclusion of Habermas' classic investigation proposes that the media-centered system once posited as the site for rational debate is now being absorbed by commercial interests that increasingly generate spectacles according to their own logic (this conclusion dates from 1962, but more recent developments in the media world can hardly be said to have mitigated it). If one wants to adhere to the idea of a single public space governed by the rules of rational communication, then the multiplicity of contemporary modes of address and speech, that is the fracturing of the "we," can only appear as a tragic loss. In a similar vein an architectural theorist like Michael Sorkin proposes an analysis of the privatization of public space that in the end predicts the imminent "end of public space."[3] In short, this site of rational and truly political discourse is always inscribed in a narrative of rise and decline—that public space did indeed once exist, at some point sufficiently removed in time for us to endow it with a certain nostalgia, but all the practices that helped to carve it out from the solid block of the authoritarian tradition will in the end turn against it. Economic interaction, the rise of the middle class, the press, and the proliferation of information: all of these terms will have a double value, and the prospects for the future will necessarily look increasingly grim. Public space is always that which is on the verge of extinction, just as all paradises, as Proust remarks, must necessarily be lost ones.

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[3] See, for instance, the contributions in Michael Sorkin (ed.): Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and The End of Public Space (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992).

II. Asymmetries and conflicts

Could there be another story, a counter-history as it were, of the idea of the public, one that does not follow the rhythm of rise and decline? Many have objected to this rise-and-fall type of description, both on the level of empirical facts and of general theoretical strategies. (An interesting inversion of the Habermasian story is provided by Richard Sennett, in his *The Fall of Public Man*,[4] in which the nineteenth century cult of authenticity and depth destroys the freedom of eighteenth century conversation culture, where the possibility of "acting" provided the individual with a way to explore social life without being bound to a particular identity.) "Classic" public life and space (no matter when and where these may be located) were always an illusion, and they were in fact based on exclusions and hidden privileges. "Agoraphobia," as Rosalyn Deutsche argues against Habermas and Sorkin's melancholic reflections on the decline of public life may very well consist of a fear of the necessary asymmetry of all public domains, and "non-violent communication" is but a sweet lie that obscures the fact that certain people always maintain the prerogative of speech, which establishes power and hierarchies. Perhaps, she suggests, the meaning of agoraphobia is precisely that it allows us to dream of another time (lost or to come) when the ideal space was or will be realized, and in relation to which our present must always appear as deficient.[5]

Similarly, when Chantal Mouffe proposes a theory of "the political," she claims that it must be distinguished from "politics" in the empirical sense of processes of policy-making and decision-making.[6] The political dimension for her has to do with the way

[4] Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public* Man (New York: Random House, 1977).

[5] Cf. Rosalyn Deutsche, "Agoraphobia," in *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996).

[6] For Mouffe's views, cf. *On the political* (London: Routledge, 2005), and the condensed statement in "Agonistic Public Spaces, Democratic Politics, and the Dynamics of Passion," in Joseph Backstein, Daniel Birnbaum, and Sven-Olov Wallenstein (eds): *Thinking Worlds: The Moscow Conference on Philosophy, Politics, and Art* (New York and Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2008). For

in which a society is symbolically instituted, and at its heart she finds the possibility of *antagonism*. Unlike liberal conceptions, which are either based on an "aggregative" model that understands the political in terms of the economy and the market, or on a deliberative model that understands the political as the application of morality, Mouffe points to the fundamental value of *passions*. Taking a political stance will always involve a separation between an "us" and a "them," the reference to a constitutive outside necessary for the creation of an identity. This poses the urgent problem of how we can create a democracy that both acknowledges the ubiquity of antagonism and is able to establish a pluralist space in which these opposing forces can meet in a non-violent fashion. This would mean to transform antagonism into "agonism," a situation where the opposing parties recognize the legitimacy of their opponent, although there is no rational consensus to be achieved. Whether this in the final instance is opposed to liberalism, or in fact constitutes a more dynamic and complex form of it, is an open question.

Every type of political order, Mouffe suggests, must then be understood as *hegemonic*, whereas the social is the realm of "sedimented practices," that is acts that conceal their origin and are taken for granted. Every order, however, is fundamentally contingent and temporary, the frontier between the political and the social is unstable, and what is "natural" to any society is always the result of a process of negotiation.

This has important bearing on the concept of public space. Unlike the version proposed by Habermas, where the notion of ideal communication functions as a regulative idea, or that of Hannah Arendt, who develops the theme of "enlarged thought" and intersubjectivity on the basis of Kant's aesthetics,[7] Mouffe

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the relation to Carl Schmitt and the conception of the political as oriented along the axis friend-foe, see her anthology *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt* (London: Verso, 1999).

[7] See Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, Ronald Beiner (ed.) (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 1992.

understands public space not as *one* singular entity that could subsequently be overtaken by hostile forces, but as a constitutive plurality. It is a continually contested and non-symmetric space, a battleground fraught with the full range of all insecurities that result from struggles for hegemony.

In art, the idea of "site specificity" that was developed against the claims for universality made by a certain modern, in no way implies a return to pre-modern versions of place-boundedness. Instead it invests the place with a disruptive energy, "x-raying" the public as a domain of struggle and suggesting a kind of negative dialectic. Public space is indeed the space where politics is realized, but this can only occur through acts of confrontation and unmasking that, in the end, must also turn against the authority of the work itself. It proposes the public domain as the ongoing experimental construction, not as a regulative idea against which all empirical places have to be measured and against which they must all appear as deficient. In this way, the kind of place that the artwork wants to occupy when it moves out into the street does not pre-exist the *work of the work*, as it were. It is never simply "there," but neither does it simply *result* from a set of operations performed: the site is always already structured, architectonically, symbolically, ideologically, and the work of the work is to pry it open, to expose its hidden contradictions. Just as reality could not simply be signified by the work, there is no outside that awaits the work.

This clash of interpretations, where one side claims the ideal and regulative status of the concept of public space (it is that against which we measure empirical public and political spaces, a kind of political "transcendental"), and the other suggests that we must acknowledge the contingency of our concepts and that we are always inside processes of both subjection (public space as the domain of discipline, of the panoptic gaze and ever more refined technologies of surveillance) *and* subjectification (public space as the site where political subjectivity is constituted and where resistance of all sorts becomes possible) is surely impossi-

ble to resolve once and for all, primarily since it also implies highly different conceptions of the very meaning of theory as such. One of them could be called "Kantian," the second "Nietzschean," and both are able to argue their respective cases with great eloquence. And strangely enough the first version, which stresses universals and communicative action, tends to be pessimistic about the present, whereas the second, which stresses contingency and the necessity of being situated, tends to be pervaded by what could be called a *necessarily unfounded optimism*. Perhaps, finally, this also indicates the difficulty in simply choosing between them.

### III. A common root of the problem: emergence
### of the private/public domain

Above I used the term "subjectification" and proposed that we hear it in a double way: on the one hand as subjection, on the other as a becoming-subject, or "subjectification." These two senses are brought together by Foucault in his use of the term *asujettissement*, and it is to Foucault that I will now turn in these brief last remarks in order to establish a third point of view, one that provides a different take on the "antinomy" produced by the two varieties of public space outlined so far.

A particular question that traverses Foucault's work, from his earliest text on existential psychiatry to the final work on the history of sexuality, relates to the meaning of *experience*. What does it mean to become a self, to become a desiring subject that relates to its own existence both practically and theoretically? Far from promoting a simple rejection of the subject—as is often assumed—Foucault's work in fact deals with the genealogy of subjectivity, of all the various fashions in which "we have come to treat ourselves as subjects and others as objects," as he says in a late essay.

For my proposal here, it is crucial to note that the emergence of the modern, self-reflexive subject is for Foucault both the

result of a process of discipline and forming, and a certain "subjectification" that produces the idea of a free being, a bearer of individual and inalienable political rights, and capable of participating precisely in the kind of public, "processual" rationality that was outlined in Kant's political philosophy. For Foucault the emergence of public space is closely connected to the idea of panoptic surveillance, and to the increasing deployment of techniques for monitoring, locating, and fixing the individual in a grid of knowledge. He analyses this process in great detail as it unfolds in the schools, in the hospital, the army, the factory and other venues. The very idea of a "public facility" is fundamentally implicated in a new regimentation of power, which at once forms and moulds the subject from the outside and provides it with a potential for agency.

The subject thus falls within the structure of address (Althusser pointed to something similar in his idea of "interpellation," although his version is much more one-sided and negative than Foucault's) that always has two sides: the subject is called upon, summoned forth and interpellated, precisely in order to exert its freedom and its rationality. In this sense there is no contradiction when Foucault says that modern societies uniquely intensify both discipline and freedom, neither of which can manage without the other. The Kantian split between the public and the private character of reasoning (the magistrate vs. the intellectual) is one way of conceptualizing and in a certain way also naturalizing this split. The public subject is always divided between these two sides, and to enter into public space is to be subjected to the gaze of another, while at the same time being called upon to respond to this gaze, even to assume it as a figure of one's own responsibility. (The "paranoid" quality of Lacan's analysis of the "Gaze as object a," to which Norman Bryson points in his essay on "The Gaze in the Expanded Field," may be rooted in this).[8]

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[8] In Hal Foster (ed.): *Vision and Visuality* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988).

The division between the public and the private, and the differences inside public space itself, originate in this conflicted genesis of the subject: as a figure of disciplinary coercion and as the agency born out of the subjectification of this discipline, and the hollowing out of an "interior" that will be filled with a "receptivity for ideas," as Kant says. We cannot stop fantasizing about a public space that would somehow be transparent and lucid, something like the ether through which the light of enlightenment would pass without resistance. And yet the very curvature of this space, the way in which it is folded so as to make us into its subjects and objects, cannot but undo this dream as soon as it encounters reality.

# The Imagination of
# Public Space

Catharina Gabrielsson

The striking glazed facades of housing complexes, exposing their insides like showcases, are but one example of how the excessively visual has become a structuralizing force in society. Nothing is kept secret: every evening, television channels compete in churning out programmes depicting the most tragic, lowly or unsightly aspects of human existence. This situation demonstrates how the categories "public" and "private" have all but disappeared in today's culture. It can be seen as a post-modern condition, in sharp contrast to a more orderly, pre-existing state. But is that really so? Perhaps the blurring begins earlier on; or maybe the border has *always* been blurred, since modernity itself is a force that obliterates all differences. If the modern metropolis has brought about a fragmentation of reality and a disintegration of all values, instigating a crisis over the sense of self and place alike, this condition also characterizes the so-called post-capitalist era.

Judging by how it has been described and defined in post-war theory, the loss of public space precedes its discovery.[1] Signifying values and norms that have been supposedly destroyed by mod-

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[1] The notion of public space as "lost" runs through the work of all of its post-war advocates, such as Hannah Arendt, Jürgen Habermas and Richard Sennett. The "rhetoric of loss" is clearly mixed with a critique of Modernity as such, associated with a deep sense of "placelessness" and alienation brought on by mass-democracy and a society based on capitalism, technology and mobility.

ern mass society, the conception of public space is impregnated with a longing for the past, for a time or place in history when these values were real. Like some ancient mythological creature, public space is woven into a fabric of dreams and ideals. So what *is* public space? Why do we keep talking about it? What is it about public space that refuses to leave us alone, even though it is clear that it is not what it was, or even—as some critics claim— that it never really existed?[2] Interpretations vary as to the content, characteristics and purpose of public space; the concept itself is vague. But if public space is becoming increasingly difficult to identify and locate in today's society, the reason might not be because it is "lost" but because it is an *idea,* an idea about the spatial gap between people in society. As a flowing intermediary space between bodies and properties, it resists any definition. It is not enough to say that public space is a cultural concept, formed by agreements and social conventions: what needs to be stressed is that its forms and apparitions are dependent on our *imagination* of public space. It is, first and foremost, an imaginary figure.[3]

Understanding public space as imaginary is not to say that it is unreal, that it cannot be represented or formed. Quite the opposite: it is the very power of our convictions that forms reality as we know it. In marking the difference between inside and outside, between that which can be seen and that which cannot, public space is really taking part in a very basic ordering of society. The idea of "the public" as defined by openness, accessibility and visibility is reflected both in the English term, referring to an

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[2] See Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, UK: The MIT Press, 2002) pp. 322-326.

[3] The terms "imagination" and "imaginary figure" draw on the thoughts of Greek/French philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis, who sees society as based on the "social imaginary," that is, forms or ideas that cannot be explained and that do not derive (logically or otherwise) from the existing. This means that social codes, rationality, language, laws or forms of governance begin as human creations—they do not correspond to some inner law or principle of existence (whether in Reason; God, Nature or such). Cornelius Castoriadis, "Imaginary and Imagination at the Crossroads," *Figures of the Thinkable* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007).

*audience*, and in the German *Öffentlichkeit*. Understanding the dichotomy of public/private as a visual differentiation can be supported by studies of nomadic societies where a people's entire existence is lived with and in front of others. In such contexts, the demarcation of "privacy" is reduced to the minimal gesture of averting one's eyes, of simply looking away. And architecture may well emerge from this visual taboo, for the earliest architectural structures we know of, such as the ziggurats of Mesopotamia or the pyramids of Egypt and Latin America, can be seen as enforcements of the *inside*—not, as it is commonly thought, as a manifestation of the exterior. The overwhelming system of walls and staircases combine into structures that hide and prevent access to the interior, an interior that constitutes the very centre of power—the transcendental power of myths and religion, symbolised through the body of the ruler or the rituals of priesthood. If architecture indeed begins as a manifestation of power, it is not merely a matter of monumentalizing power as a physical form; it is by making its core a secret.

Is deciding on what is *not* to be seen the first true cultural impulse? In that perspective, it really marks a radical shift when power is transferred to the outside. Democracy can be seen as a transformation of power from a defined transcendental source, symbolized by the ruler, into the immanence of an open space where it becomes part of the social, that is a mere relationship between people.[4] The emergence of democracy in Greek antiquity is inseparable from the establishment of the *polis*, in other

[4] This description draws on the writings of French political philosopher Claude Lefort. According to Lefort, democracy signifies a situation where power cannot be represented or symbolized by a fixed entity (such as a person or a party) but is transformed into an element within "the social." His description of power in democracy as "an empty place," signifying a void or a loss of meaning, captures a conception of power as belonging to no one and everyone, but also of democracy as something inherently tragic. We are thrown into an existence without certainty, where everything is open and questionable. Public space can thus be seen as a site where this fundamental "groundlessness" comes to the fore—but also, as a democratic institution, as a compensation for this lack of certainty. Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory* (Cambridge, Oxford: Polity, 1986).

words of a space that simultaneously represents and serves the needs of this form of governance. The conscious act of establishing such a space can thus be considered as the original formulation of democracy; where public space, in itself, constitutes the fundamental democratic institution. To collectively produce a space where the law of society is being upheld and simultaneously being put to question is something incredibly powerful, for it retains its power over the imagination. And even though the contemporary conception of the public differs greatly from that of antiquity, it still signifies a shared existence and collective decisions, providing an element of coherence in society.

Today, public space is commonly thought of as a space for interaction and communication. It is a space for *breaking* laws, rather than making them. But its importance as a visual field is embedded in its very core—it gathers the notions of light, openness, reason and truth into the powerful metaphor of "enlightenment." As public space becomes a medium for "public opinion" (signifying democracy), or even "common sense" (signifying "pure reason"), it becomes deeply embedded into the entire modern project. And however much that project has been deconstructed and criticised, the notion of public space as open and light, as devoted to freedom and truth, is still operative within today's society. Representatives of the state repeatedly refer to their organisations as "transparent," that is, of decision-making as visually accessible and thus open for public scrutiny. Somehow this way of reasoning is articulated most forcefully in reference to public buildings—almost to the point of obsession with the glazed facade, taken as the ultimate sign of "official" Swedish culture. This representation of ideals by means of naive architectural symbolism runs parallel with the fact that *real* openness—that is, the conditions for critique, accessibility, democratic protest and participation—is being called into question. In the name of protecting the "open society" from the enemy within, public space and buildings are increasingly being subjected to restrictions, surveillance and control. Something strange is going on as architectural glazing and visual exposure become selling points

for private and public enterprises alike, in each case belying the truth of real borders closing.

But public space is not only a matter of the distribution, representation and legitimacy of power. In terms of appearance, as a space where reality comes into view, public space is also drawn into the most basic levels of human existence. Religion, psychology and sociology are as much part of the set-up of public space as are notions of democracy. Confronting the "rhetoric of loss" associated with public space, critics have objected to the idealist, nostalgic and even reactionary implications that are embedded in the traditional understanding of the concept. In order to draw attention to the social and psychological importance of "collective" or "everyday" spaces, there has been a new emphasis on the formless and unplanned urban spaces that defy the monumental agora. Parking lots and shopping malls are identified as important sites for emerging publics, that is, as places where new political subjects and social identities are able to emerge. In order to pinpoint this social importance of common spaces, it has even been suggested that "public space" as a concept should be abandoned altogether, that its traditional ideals are politically suspect and that its values are exhausted. But this potentiality for social interaction is not in opposition to public space, understood as an imaginary figure: it is very much part of the central idea. Understood as a stage for society, public space is wrapped up in the formation of personal identity, the establishment of self, through involvement with others. This stage-like quality brings us back to the idea of the audience, but the certain passivity implied appears to be at odds with the notion of non-hierarchical equality that is similarly embedded in the concept. The complex sets of meanings attributed to public space are full of such unresolved tensions and paradoxes.

There is, in other words, an ongoing deconstruction of public space in theory, a letting go of its pre-set forms and ideals in order to expand on its meaning and scope. And although these recent attempts to re-name and re-locate public space have the virtue of

bringing about an awareness of its formal complexity and social significance, it comes at the expense of deeper political meaning. Its institutional quality—as a *form* for democratic society—is even placed in opposition to its capacity to generate meanings on a social or personal level. Ignoring the significance of a space where we appear to one another as *equals*, this theoretical position makes no contribution to defending public spaces from surveillance and privatization. Therefore, the current tendency to de-politicise public spaces, to restrict access to them and the democratic rights that public space at once symbolizes and guarantees, proceeds undisputed—for lack of better arguments.

Today, awareness of the political and critical aspects of public space has primarily shifted to the media. Hannah Arendt's conception of public space as a medium for a shared reality is reflected, at least in part, by the function of the media as evidence of "reality" today; something is not real unless you have read it somewhere, or seen it on television. But in Jürgen Habermas' famous reading, oddly lingering between fact and fiction, the problems inherent in this media model stand out vividly. Understood as originating from the new urban meeting places for the bourgeoisie—a set-up of boulevards, parks, institutions, department stores, coffee houses and clubs, as well as the new free press—public space is clearly a privileged area, reserved for an elite. Its critical function, serving as a medium to influence power by force of "common sense," relies on the fact that it is protected—not only from invasion by political or commercial forces, but also from those who have no valuable opinion to express. The model collapses, according to Habermas, when public space is invaded by people without education or property, when anyone has the right to a public voice (that is, to vote). His definition of an ideal liberal public space is clearly at odds with modern society, not only in terms of the influence of capitalism on culture and politics (which he condemns) which erode the notion of public space, but also with mass democracy itself. The ideals of truth, reason and progress as embedded in liberal de-

mocracy are clearly contradictory to what happens when anyone has a say. It could therefore be argued that the liberal conception of public space is not really public at all. It is really only an extension of the bourgeois home, a platform for the hegemony of the middle classes who take it upon themselves to speak "for all."

It is easy enough to recognize this interiority in today's media climate, to identify its mechanisms of familiarity and closure and even to discern its pre-set agenda, which determines what is public or not. The idea that public space must be protected to perform its function is retained, however, in the notion of "public service." In reference to the control and content of national television and radio broadcasting, the ideals of a *free* public space—protected from interference by political forces as well as commercial manipulation—is still being upheld. What needs to be noted, however, is the tension between openness and closure that this situation reflects. The various restrictions that guard access to and use of public space can be seen as an echo of the ancient *polis*, whose openness was guarded by walls. For Hannah Arendt, the fact that the freedom of the *polis* was reserved for an elite was of secondary interest, for she saw the walls as the functional equivalent of societal laws. Thus openness was seen as dependent on closure; freedom does not exist outside society, but is created and guaranteed by it. This tension between openness and closure, freedom and restrictions, is one of the most difficult paradoxes within the imagination of public space. Even at an ordinary level, we can recognise how every appearance in public by necessity entails following *rules*, either for social conduct or civil behaviour—that everything simply *cannot* be said or done in public. This is, in fact, exactly what Michel Foucault has addressed in terms of the "disciplination" of the individual—most notably in *L'Ordre du discours* (1971). What we conceive of as a human subject is, in fact, *produced* by society. This undermines the notions of free speech and action, so central to the process of imagining public space, which presupposes that we are free to begin with. Through Foucault,

power comes into it in another way, making the notion of truly democratic, accessible and "free" public space seem completely utopian.

The Internet holds a special position in this setup of media public spaces. It is often suggested that virtual space has replaced physical space in terms of being "public," but the situation is much more complex. What we are faced with is rather a variety of places, real and virtual, a complicated geometry of nodes and networks that constantly affect one another. The real and the virtual take part in forming our experience of reality; but has not that always been the case? In itself, the Internet is but a vast technological re-enforcement of public space as an idea, as a form and as a potential; a virtual extension of its imagination. It therefore has the capacity to disclose some of its innermost conflicts—especially to the point where not *one* but several public spaces exist, and not *one* public but many different kinds of audiences. If one reads Habermas properly (and especially through his critics), however, this multiplicity of audiences and sites has always been the case: the notion of a single public space that has the power to unite us all is but a sign of the power of the imagination in all our interpretations.

The Internet is also a perfect example of the problems inherent in a borderless and totally accessible space, or in this case a *landscape* of discontinuous spaces which are impossible to control or monitor. Albeit rich with potentiality for individual freedom and choice, for creating relationships and affinities, the lack of regulations and restrictions opens Internet use up to abuse and misuse. The un-doing of borders and lack of editing on the Internet—its ultimate "freedom"—shows how a space that indeed is open to all also becomes filled with irrelevant and deviant human expressions. Again, un-doing the limits to public space is like un-doing the laws of society. The Internet completely blurs whatever remains of borders, not only between public and private but between the intimate, the social, the commercial and the political. Somehow the tension

between closure and openness, freedom and restriction, is an indispensable *part* of public space if it is to retain its ideal qualities, whether as a medium for critique, for social coherence or for political action. The energy needs somehow to be collected and arrested in order to be productive, just as light must be reflected in order to be seen, or sound halted to be heard. If the "openness" of public space signifies the potentiality of free speech and action, its "closure" can be interpreted in terms of responsibility, of facing up to consequences, of confronting and uniting with others. The problem is not its inherent ideals but rather its all-embracing width, which leads to unavoidable paradoxes.

And what of physical space, what about the city? Following the conception of liberal public space as defined by Habermas, the city as a whole was never "public" at all. Even if understood as an urban meeting place, the bourgeois public space took the form of a protected capsule in an otherwise hostile environment. The territories of the masses, the streets and alleys, were seen as a threat to orderly rule; they could only be made public by means of control. The current tendency of re-modelling urban spaces clearly connects with this notion. The common understanding of urban public spaces as a kind of living room, that is meeting places for pleasurable encounters, forms a continuous trail with its genesis in the bourgeois *salon*. So urban spaces are made public by means of domestication, by drawing them into the semiotics that originate from the private, which stand for *private* ownership. As the city is increasingly being programmed for the comfort and consumption of the middle class, slogans for making the urban environment "clean and safe" become issues of social sanitation. The unwanted elements—the poor, the young, the foreign, the needy and the homeless—are kept out of view by means of privatization, or by more subtle strategies of territorial design that mimic the signs of ownership. It is perhaps self-evident that public space has always been dependent on, and represented the desires of, the dominant class of society. Less

noticed, however, is that the privatization, de-politicisation and domestication of contemporary public spaces are but the logical outcome of the paradoxes within liberalism itself. The ideology that gave rise to the politically engaged, critical citizen—who has long since been declared a fictitious being—also laid the foundation for someone who, in comparison, is very much real and alive: the client. If the ideal of the engaged citizen has been transformed into the consumer, it should really come as no surprise that the square is transformed into a shopping mall.

It is important to recognize that the juridical definition of public space, in Sweden, is linked to common use and accessibility. It is not primarily defined in terms of public ownership. The freedoms and rights that are fundamental to democracy may well be guaranteed in such "common places," but this means that these rights are continuously negotiated with other legal rights—not just anti-criminal regulations and rules of civil behaviour, but also the rights of the private property holder. And even though access to and use of public spaces are protected by law, the increasing use of private security guards tends to influence behaviour in practice. Since a space is said to be public simply when the public has access to it, it shows how the concept of public space merges with another, namely "the common," which originally referred to plots of land outside the village that were used and tended collectively. The modern image of public space can therefore be traced back to two different origins, the city and the countryside, or more specifically the former agrarian society. The urban heritage harks back to the *polis* and the Roman *res publica;* it then reappears in the metropolis, and hence takes the scattered form of newspapers and television channels, streets and parks, institutions and cafés in democratic capitalistic society. The rural background, in contrast, is much vaguer and generally overlooked by theory.[5] Although "public" and "common" space

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[5] Even so, the power of the common still holds a grip on the imagination: not primarily expressed in terms of claiming the streets or protesting against the privatization of urban spaces, but via the right to nature—and in this

share values associated with accessibility and social coherence, the imaginary content of the common is slightly different. It implies a more complex, organic form of society, based on another conception of the human subject; not just as autonomous, self-sufficient and "free" but moreover as co-dependent and formed through interaction with others. Signifying a space *outside* the borders of society, it offers a means for escape or survival for the needy, poor and homeless. In providing space for those on the margins it recognizes the rights of the powerless. But taken as an essential "outside," however, the common is just as impregnated with contradictions and nostalgic ideals as is its urban counterpart. There is clearly no "outside" to contemporary Western society and its prevailing economic forces.

The inherent contradictions in the imagination of public space are thus impossible to ignore. There is a tension between the liberal conception of the autonomous individual, whose rights and freedoms must be protected from the outside world, and the conception of communality, even a collective co-existence and a basic coherence in society. And if the public square stands for permanence and monumentality, its emptiness bearing witness to abandoned ideals, the street symbolizes another order, that of "taking to the streets." Political control and political protest are equally present in the imagination of public space. But these contradictions merely reflect the paradoxes within democracy itself. In the most pragmatic way possible, democracy can be understood as the rule of the majority of those who are allowed to vote. Yet democracy is unthinkable without a set of higher principles that define its inner core; whether we are speaking of freedom, openness, progress or reason—ideals that may have become unfashionable, but to which there is no viable alternative—they are all as much part of democracy as the mere distribution of power. The principles of

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form it is represented both by Swedish law and in public behaviour. *Allemansrätten*—the right of everyone—gives the public free access to nature even if the land is privately owned.

human rights have not developed spontaneously, nor do they become real without struggle and articulated defence. And just like democracy, public space is unthinkable without wider considerations of what is just, fair, and important in society. It is *dependent* on ideals: if addressed solely from a pragmatic point of view, the concept itself collapses.

The French scientist and philosopher Bruno Latour has remarked that political philosophy is full of descriptions of "empty arenas where naked people are supposed to meet and talk to one another," but has very little to add regarding the subject of their conversations.[6] For him, the central question is what is *brought* into the public, what is *made* to appear; that is, the issues that become matters of public concern. He links the issue, the "thing," and the old word for meeting or council (*ting*). And he reminds us that the reason we meet is not because we are alike or agree, but because we are and think *differently*. In other words, controversy and conflict form the true basis of democracy, not agreement and consensus. The urban public spaces of today bear witness to this, as transformed into "things" whose value is purely commercial. Their mythological origin as a political meeting place has given way to the use of public space solely as a medium for consumption.

Latour's pragmatic reasoning actually offers opportunities for conceiving of public spaces differently; but yet again, it is simply a matter of reconsidering the content of its imaginary figure. Understood as a space for appearance, as a way to make things visible and accessible, it now becomes equally important to notice all that is *not* seen (or heard) in public. The current neo-liberal strategy of transforming the city turns it into a

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[6] Bruno Latour, "From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik or How to Make Things Public," Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (ed.) *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005). Peter Weibel's contribution to this compilation, "Art and Democracy," is a full-length critical historical survey of how art relates to the political and to public space.

homogenous image of society, representing and making space for *one* human subject: the middle-class consumer. This conflicts with prevailing notions in political theory, which emphasize that democracy is based on differences. It also differs, paradoxically, from those who point to the dangers of an increasingly fragmented and segregated society. Following this reasoning, public space can derive a renewed sense of purpose. The sense of closure that dominates public spaces can be countered by an equal measure of openness and accessibility; public spaces can be planned and created in order to make differences meet, yet perform a function as a binding medium in society—much like a common language, in fact.

Planning the urban environment as egalitarian spaces is neither a radical nor a new idea. As a practical response to the needs of a society of immigrants and corresponding social tensions, Central Park in Manhattan is an early example of this. But there is an indisputable *naivete*, even a cynical aspect, to the idea that societal conflicts can be minimized simply by bringing people together. Sharing a space does not automatically imply social justice, much less political change. And even if we consider public space as a mere screen, an image of society, the question will ultimately arise: What do we *do* with this information, this projected image of society? What does our experience of life in public compel us to *do,* how does it affect our *thinking*? How does public space, as a physical and tangible element, take part in forming our conceptions of self, of others and of reality? However we choose to navigate around these issues, public space continuously confronts us with the full burden of *being* in society. It challenges our capacity to engage with and interact with others, to make use of our rights and freedoms to some ethical or political end. That is why public space continues to haunt us. Signifying reality and truth, critique and convention, a medium for commercial desires and political protests alike, it exposes the fragile and paradoxical structure of our entire existence. Public space is all about the

force of our imaginations and the power of our convictions: it must always be lost and found.

# The Face and the Public: Race, Secrecy and Digital Art Practice[1]

Jennifer González

The function and importance of race and race discourse in online digital spaces and in contemporary digital art revolves around an apparent paradox. On the one hand, there is a recurring desire to see online digital spaces as sites of universal subjectivity that can escape the limitations of race. This desire tends to intersect with assumptions about public space and systems of ethics that valorize the neutralization of cultural, racial and sexual difference, as well as historical specificity. The apparently neutral space of the Internet is viewed as a potentially progressive domain for overcoming barriers that can otherwise obstruct or restrict ideal forms of participation in the public sphere. On the other hand, a proliferation of racially marked avatars and experimental hybrids (human and non-human) increasingly populate artificial worlds and online chat-spaces. Race, as a set of visual cues operating in graphical interfaces, has literally become a fashion accessory to be bought, sold, traded, and toyed with experimentally and experientially online.[2] This proliferation of typologies and pseudo identities provides the opportunity for the expanded display of difference,

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[2] Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 57.

and this display seems directly and actively to undermine the prospect of the neutral, universal, online subject.

It is not a real paradox, of course, because both conditions operate in parallel to reduce cultural and racial difference to a question of appearance: the domain of visual signs. On-line identity, participation, and power have become tethered to images (or their elision) for social and political ends. Questions arise, however, concerning how race discourse actually intersects with the Internet, and with digital culture. [3] What are the conditions for ethical relations that entail encounters with racial difference? How do theoretical explorations of "the face" and "the public" bear on the subject? If vision and visibility are central to the operative dynamics of race, as has been argued not only by Franz Fanon but many others subsequently, then might it be possible to undo the power of race discourse as an oppressive regime by decoupling it from vision or the visible?[4] Or, alternately, might it be that visual culture is the very place where contemporary race discourse might be most powerfully critiqued and transformed? These questions are central to recent theories of digital art practice that directly engage race as a dominant and pervasive visual discourse within an emerging public sphere. Technoculture is often praised for the ways it enhances democracy by realizing an ideal public sphere. But this view is generally inattentive to the fact that the experience of the technocultural public sphere can also be one of aggression, exclusion, and invisibility. Taking the writings of media theorist Mark Hansen as a provocative and symptomatic starting point, this essay explores how the desire for racial "neutrality" can

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[3] See Jennifer Gonzalez, "Electronic habitus: agit-prop in an imaginary world," in *Visual Worlds*, John R. Hall, Blake Stimson and Lisa Tamiris Becker (eds) (New York: Routledge, 2005), "Morphologies: Race as Visual Technology" in *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self* (New York: International Center of Photography, 2003) and "The Appended Subject: Race and Identity as Digital Assemblage," in *Race in Cyberspace*, Beth Kolko, Lisa Nakamura & Gil Rodman, (eds) (New York: Routledge, 2000).

[4] Franz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks (New York: Grove, 1967).

lead to the unintentional repression of important forms of cultural difference. Two models of ethics, grounded in the writings of Giorgio Agamben and Emannuel Levinas respectively, are posed as alternatives in the quest for understanding the importance of "the face" as a device for the unfolding, or unmaking of race in the public space of the Internet.

### Universal address

In 2004 Mark Hansen published an essay titled "Digitizing the Racialized Body or The Politics of Universal Address," arguing that the Internet provides an unprecedented possibility for a new ethical encounter between humans, in part because it can render them invisible to each other. Hansen observes that digital art can produce affective states in the user that might ultimately lead to recognizing incongruities or incommensurabilities between categories of identity and embodied singularity. [5] Race becomes a lens for Hansen's thinking about online identification as making possible community beyond identity, namely:

> Because race has always been plagued by a certain disembodiment (the fact that race, unlike gender, is so clearly a construction, since racial traits are not reducible to organic, i.e., genetic, organization), it will prove especially useful for exposing the limitations of the Internet as a new machinic assemblage for producing selves. For this reason, deploying the lens of race to develop our thinking about online identification will help us to exploit the potential offered by the new media for experiencing community beyond identity.

Hansen's use of contemporary art and discourses of racial (dis)embodiment to illustrate his argument are worth further analysis precisely because they signal a set of consistent, symptomatic desires within media theory regarding the potential of the Internet. While I applaud Hansen's anti-racist goals, the

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[5] Mark Hansen, "Digitizing the Racialized Body or The Politics of Universal Address," *Substance*, 33:2 (2004) pp. 107–133.

general framework of his essay returns us to an overly utopian understanding of human relations that leaves little room for more subtle analyses of the concrete effects of cultural, racial and sexual difference operative online today.

Hansen lays out his essay in four parts, summarized here and addressed in more detail below. First, he emphasizes the "emptiness" of visual signifiers (of race) on the Internet because such images lose any necessary attachment to real referents, becoming "something more like an unapologetic celebration of the simulacral."[6] Next, he redeems the concept of "passing" online by suggesting that, not only does every online participant have to "pass" whether textually or visually, but this passing also indicates an inherent failure of symbolic, visual interpellation: "insofar as it constitutes a *prosthetic* body that *replaces* the lived body, passing can leave no bodily residue that could be made visible or otherwise rendered culturally intelligible."[7] In the third section, Hansen offers a close reading of a video game designed by digital artist Keith Piper, arguing that Piper's work offers an experience of *affect* that opens a space for human singularity "beyond identity." He then closes the essay with a final section on the writings of Giorgio Agamben and Gilbert Simondon, suggesting that "Piper's work seizes on the very gap between image and body that, following Agamben, holds the potential for redemption, which is to say, the opening to potentiality itself."[8]

Hansen's argument is engaging and nuanced, but reveals a certain racial and cultural privilege, or naivete. For example, he finds that "passing" in online environments (that is, posing as someone other than oneself, particularly in terms of race or gender) allows for a "radical disjunction between racial identity categories and the singularity of each body."[9] He argues that online digital spaces "suspend the constraint exercised by the body

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[6] Hansen, 109–110.
[7] Ibid, p. 113.
[8] Ibid, p. 123.
[9] Ibid, p. 113.

as a visible signifier or as a receptive surface for the markings of raced and gendered particularity."[10] In other words, since we are all theoretically invisible online (web cams notwithstanding), and cannot be marked or mapped visually, we can all pass. Hansen hopes that by celebrating the ubiquity of passing on line (we all are equally subjected to the condition of *having* to pass) that cultural signifiers (of race, gender) will be shown to have no natural correlation to any particular body and will thus be revealed as no more than "social codings."[11] Hansen presents this vision of cyberspace as not merely experimental, but also pedagogical: through the transcendence of visibility, those who are engaged in passing on-line will, of necessity, learn the very bankruptcy of categories of identity.[12]

Yet, "social codings" are precisely the forms of ideology that are most resistant to transformation. If race is revealed to be (or has scientifically been proven to be) a social *code*, rather than a natural or biological *condition*, this revelation has yet to transform the social *function* of race in the maintenance of uneven power relations. The claim that "on-line self invention effectively places everyone in the position previously reserved for certain raced subjects" ignores the many ways that cultural privilege and hierarchy exist online, in terms of literacy, access, social networks, and even forms of self invention.[13] Hansen suggests that because race is performative and not ontological, online performances of "Blackness," for example, are all essentially equivalent. In other words, "Blackness" as a cultural sig-

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[10] Ibid, p. 111.

[11] Ibid, p. 114.

[12] Ibid, p. 123.

[13] Ibid, p. 112. For discussions of the psychological and material conditions of racial passing see, "Slippery Language and False Dilemmas: The Passing Novels of Child, Howells, and Harper," Julie Cary Nerad, *American Literature*, Vol. 75, No. 4 (December 2003), pp. 813–841. For an interesting discussion of racial passing and cinematic cyborgs see, LeiLani Nishime "The Mulatto Cyborg: Imagining a Multiracial Future," *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (Winter 2005), pp. 34–49.

nifier may be a performance of a performance when it appears online, but it is not always the same performance, nor always the same subject performing. Hansen equates on-line self-invention, black face, and racial passing as forms of "imitation of an imitation; a purely disembodied simulacrum."[14]

While some aspects of race, gender and sexuality are performative, as Judith Butler so convincingly argues, it must also be observed that not all forms of performance are equal, nor do they have equal effects.[15] Lisa Nakamura has effectively argued, in her book *Cybertypes*, that on-line "passing" frequently produces stereotypes of race that become solidified through their repeated performance through a kind of "identity tourism."[16] Nakamura writes, "identity tourism is a type of non-reflective relationship that actually widens the gap between the other and the one who only performs itself *as the other*…."[17] While Hansen philosophically hopes performative repetition will render stereotypes void of meaning, Nakamura observes that it appears to merely reinforce narrow conceptions of race. Her argument is echoed in sociological studies showing that racial "identities" may be more immutable, fixed and shallow in on-line interaction than off-line.[18] The Internet, with all of its various forms of anonymity, has not yet produced the ideal race-neutral conditions hoped for in Hansen's essay.[19]

Passing in the real world, or on-line, entails more than visually choreographing one's appearance. It is a complex *psychic*

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[14] Hansen, p. 113.

[15] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 25.

[16] Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes* (New York: Routledge, 2002) p. 57.

[17] Nakamura, 57. Emphasis added.

[18] Byron Burkhalter, "Reading Race Online: Discovering Racial Identity in Usenet Discussions," in *Communities in Cyberspace*, Marc A. Smith and Peter Kollock (eds) (New York: Routledge, 1999), 63.

[19] On the contrary, the Internet gave rise to a proliferation of race-based "hate" sites at such an alarming rate that a special UN seminar devoted to the issue was held as early as 1997. See Andrew Jakubowicz, "Ethnic Diversity, "Race," and the Cultural Political Economy of Cyberspace," *Democracy and New Media,* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004), p. 219.

activity that foregrounds precisely the ways in which subjects are generally fixed by racial typologies. Anyone who has racially passed, or who has worn black face, knows that there is nothing, truly nothing, disembodied about it.[20] Indeed every element of existence as an embodied subject comes to the fore in real-life moments of racial passing. Every nuance of skin tone, every glance and gesture might betray the subject's secret. Lost in Hansen's argument is a sophisticated notion of the subject's psychological relation to this pseudo-disembodiment, and the projections and introjections inherent in encounters with others online. Passing always presumes conditions of unequal power. The *need* to pass (historically to avoid racial discrimination) and the *desire* to pass (in order to experiment with subjectivity online) are limited in Hansen's argument to a mere *condition* of passing.

Stuart Hall has argued that race is best understood as a discourse, constructed by thought and language, responds to real, concrete conditions of cultural difference.[21] If the complexity of race discourse is grasped in the fullness of its multiple articulations, then it is not possible to discount processes of identification, fantasy, and dominance that racial difference elicits. Race is always an embodied discourse that acts on and through living human beings at the level of corporeal practices, movements, gestures, and gazes—ultimately constructing and deconstructing what Franz Fanon has called the "bodily schema" of individual subjects.[22] Maria Fernandez makes a parallel argument in her essay "Cyberfeminism, Racism, Embodiment," suggesting that unspoken anxieties that attend the conception of race and racial difference produce a kind of physical haunting that emerges as a set of frequently unconscious and involuntary rote behavioral

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[20] See Marlon Riggs' film Ethnic Notions, 1987.

[21] Stuart Hall, "Subjects in History: Making Diasporic Identities," in *The House that Race Built*, Wahneema Lubiano (ed.) (New York: Vintage, 1998) pp. 289–299.

[22] Franz Fanon, Peau Noir, *Masques Blancs* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1952), p. 88.

habits.[23] Drawing on earlier feminist analyses of embodiment, Fernandez suggests that, although much has been written about race as an ideological construct, the *performance* of racism in everyday physical and social interactions is of fundamental concern for understanding its continued reproduction. Race as a set of embodied practices supports Michael Omi and Howard Winant's conception of race as a *social formation* that is constantly under revision. What they call "racial formations" can be found both in small moments (at the micro-level) of racist encounter and in systemic (or macro-level) epistemological approaches to cultural and ontological understandings of human being.[24] Taken together, these theorists provide a framework for understanding race as a complex and nuanced discourse functioning at every level of individual and collective representation, consciousness, behavior and organization. Online passing is never free from the social, historical and psychological constraints and conditions that also shape racial discourse off-line. The invisibility of "real" bodies cannot, alone, produce a racially neutral space or even racially neutral subjects.

Race, as a discourse, is not an unchanging historical framework that limits identities to fixed taxonomies; it is rather a dynamic system of social and cultural *techniques* carefully calibrated to constrain, define, and develop a nexus of human activity where the ontology of the human, the representation of the body, and the social position of the subject intersect. At this intersection, the invention and perpetuation of various forms of race discourse can be understood to effectively employ the human organism as an *experimental* object of signification. The domains of law, commerce, and medicine have participated and continue to participate in this experiment. Thus the Internet might be better understood as, among other things, a new

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[23] Maria Fernandez, "Cyberfeminism, Racism, Embodiment," *Domain Errors: Cyberfeminist Practices*, (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2002).

[24] Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: from the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 60.

opportunity for such experiments in signification to play out rather than the condition for their disappearance.

### Visual corruption, affective purity

Hansen supports his argument for the liberating aspects of the Internet, not with an on-line art project where passing is an essential element of engagement, but rather with an off-line video game called *Caught Like a Nigger in Cyberspace*, which appeared on a CD that British artist Keith Piper included in the catalog for his exhibition *Relocating the Remains* (1997). The game requires the user to encounter a series of obstacles on the way to the promising realm of "cyberspace." Standardized identification forms, for example, offer limited choices for the user who must select among such identities as "tech-head" or "Al Gore." If the user clicks on "Other," the application for entry into cyberspace is put on hold. At this point, the user can choose to wait indefinitely in a waiting room or click a button that says, "Do not touch." If one chooses to disobey and touch the button, a black male figure appears on the bottom of the screen. Seen from behind, the figure appears to be running, either toward a promising future or into the labyrinth of a hostile territory, depending upon the subsequent choices of the game player. *Caught like a Nigger in Cyberspace* invites the player to identify with the running figure whose future unfolds in a dystopic landscape. Because there is no clear way to win the game, it ultimately provides a counter-discourse to utopian visions of cyberspace, and it more specifically indicates the racial divide that exists, both economically and culturally, between those with access to the Internet and those without.

For Hansen, the game also offers an unusual opportunity for a new kind of feeling—frustration. He describes his own experience of struggling to succeed at playing the game: his various thwarted attempts at success and a final affective "emptiness" that came about through a "kind of becoming-other, a loosening of the grip of the identity markings" of his own em-

bodiment.[25] More specifically, he states: "the work compels its viewer to live through the exclusion of certain bodies from cyberspace via the frantic temporal mode of a survival exercise, thereby mobilizing the disappointment of viewer expectations concerning the payoff of video game-playing (where some kind of clear victory is an always achievable goal) in order to deliver a message about racial inequality."[26] Hansen implies an underlying parallel between his own affective response of frustration playing the game and the materially specific situation of "living through exclusion" from cyberspace. For Hansen, this affective "living through exclusion" is uniquely possible in the artificial space of the digital realm precisely because he is not limited by his own, white, privileged body; that is, he can enter into the space of the game and experience the artificiality of racial identifications and thereby become distanced from his own social position, if not literally, then emotionally.

This affective response, for Hansen, relies on conditions of identification that are *not* rooted to visual signs. He suggests that the "raced image" (I presume he means images of non-white subjects) can no longer broker processes of identity formation or struggles for recognition precisely because the image is always already corrupted by the *spectacle* that is capitalism, as well as by the long history of racially oppressive regimes of visual representation (particularly in the human sciences) that remain in force as instruments for classification and exclusion.[27] I agree that people bring to the Internet (consciously and unconsciously) the inheritance of image cultures that precede them when encountering hegemonic visual discourses online that tend to co-opt, transform, or overpower other forms of image signification. For Hansen, images on the Internet should therefore be summarily rejected as a viable system of meaning or exchange. By pitting the concrete particularity of the visual image against the ineffable and transito-

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[25] Ibid, p. 123.
[26] Ibid, p. 122.
[27] Hansen, p. 126.

ry experience of *affect*, Hansen hopes to show how the "raced image" is an always already corrupted medium "stripped of any positive meaning for the subjects that it would mark."[28] Affect thus emerges as a kind of pure and universal category of feeling unencumbered by "identity or individuality." Hansen summarizes: "Piper seizes the empty husk of the raced image, not to rehabilitate it against capitalist fetishism, but to extract its redemptive kernel. In the various ways we have explored, he deploys this empty image as the catalyst for a reinvestment of the body beyond the image, for an exposure of the rootedness of life in a source, affectivity, that lies beyond identity and individuality and thus beyond the reach of commodification."[29]

There are two problems with this argument. First, affect is not impervious to capitalism, nor does it exist abstractly, beyond the experience of actual human subjects and their particular identities. Eliciting affect, in the form of pre-packaged desires, might be one of capitalism's most successful means of self-reproduction. Specific kinds of affect (anxiety, horror, compassion) that can be predicted and managed might even be one of capitalism's primary commodities. More to the point, affect is historical not a-temporal, both in the life of the individual and for groups. In her essay on contemporary websites that operate through a model of collective feeling or experience (the Aryan Nations website presenting white supremacy as a form of love rather than hate, for example) Sara Ahmed writes,

> … The role of feelings in mediating the relation between individual and collective bodies is complicated. How we feel about another—or a group of others—is not simply a matter of individual impressions, or impressions that are created anew in the present. Rather, feelings rehearse associations that are already in place, in the way in which they 'read' the proximity of others, at the same time as they establish the 'truth' of the reading. The impressions we have of others, and the impressions left by oth-

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[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid, p. 125.

ers are shaped by histories that stick, at the same time as they generate the surfaces and boundaries that allow bodies to appear in the present.[30]

For Ahmed, it is structures of feeling that shape the very appearance of bodies in the domain of the visual, and provide the conditions for their legibility. Affect does not exist "beyond" individuals and communities, nor is it separable from the circulation of signs—including visual signs—that produce it or derive from it.

Second, images cannot be "empty" or "full." Images are signs deployed strategically within the context of an ongoing circulation of other signs. Whether "raced" or not, images have different meanings for each subject who encounters them, regardless of their hegemonic or subaltern position. It is not possible therefore to argue, as Hansen does, that a given image is "stripped of any positive meaning" *a priori*. If the "raced" image is merely an "empty husk" for Hansen, it may have more to do with his acceptance of it as stereotype, than with its actual potential for progressive transformation and identification. It is true that a long history of racist portrayals have repressed human qualities in order to depict a given subject as a caricature or "type" rather than a unique individual.[31] For this reason, it is all the more important to attend to the ways particular images perpetuate this tradition, and the ways in which other images work against it. As with semantic reversals of words, such as "black," images that have served as tools of domination (i.e. racial stereotypes) have also been re-deployed to serve a counter-hegemonic purpose.[32]

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[30] Sara Ahmed, "Collective Feelings, Or the Impressions Left by Others," *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 21(2) (SAGE, London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi, 2004): pp. 25–42; quote from p. 39.

[31] Henry Louis Gates, Jr. "The Face and Voice of Blackness," *Facing History: The Black Image in American Art 1710–1940* (San Francisco: Bedford Arts, 1990), xxix–xliv.

[32] There are many examples in the fine arts, but the work of Betye Saar (Liberation of Aunt Jemima, 1972) or Fred Wilson (Mine/Yours, 1995) come to mind.

Although Hansen's reading of Piper's work is clearly sympathetic, his insistence on the emptiness of the image in favor of the fullness of his own affective response, risks obscuring the deep, critical engagement with image culture that is its very basis.

The original installation of *Relocating the Remains* addressed the history of the African Diaspora from the period of colonization, through the Atlantic slave trade to the migrations of the present. As a series of thematically integrated individual works produced primarily between 1990 and 1997, the exhibition deployed a carefully choreographed montage of contemporary and archival images including British colonial maps, nineteenth-century anthropometric photographs and recent surveillance images, in order to emphasize the long history of optical techniques for defining and controlling racial difference. While some works evoked the history of sea passage, with titles such as *Long Journey* or *Trade Winds,* Piper also included several works that sought to make more concrete the conditions of the lived black body in an emerging digital techno-culture. Ashley Dawson has observed that the exhibition revealed the homologies among colonial discourses, contemporary cyber-libertarian dogma, and neo-liberal accounts of globalization today, drawing "our attention to the rhetorical constructions through which information technologies come to be socially understood as well as the technical architectures through which such technologies shape society."[33]

In one example, *Surveillances: Tagging the Other* (1992), Piper installed a row of four video screens on which a black male body is seen to be subject to the gaze of a variety of dominant surveillance technologies, from eugenics to criminology. Each screen shows a head-and-shoulders view—sometimes in profile like a mug shot, sometimes with a frontal view—framed by a map or landscape and a set of geometric diagrams, suggesting that he is both surveyed

[33] Ashley Dawson, "Surveillance Sites: Digital Media and the Dual Society in Keith Piper's Relocating the Remains," *Postmodern Culture*, 12.1. (2001): no page numbers.

and silenced, both made to appear and prohibited from enunciation. When this piece was originally shown at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, viewers were invited to activate the four screens by pointing an infrared gun and shooting at each image like a target. It was a decidedly unpleasant element of engagement. What became clear immediately was that the work was not only about the body—or the face—as a target of racist violence but also about the responsibility one takes in relation to that body: the moment of pulling the artificial trigger became entwined with forms of physical assault in the culture at large; the violence necessary to activate the image in the space of the gallery invited comparisons with other forms of representational violence both in the history of art and in forms of museum display. As with *Caught Like a Nigger in Cyberspace*, the digital interface had a powerful effect, but the image of the targeted subject was far from secondary; it was the very ground of the work's signification. The "black" body is a signifier of critical importance, as an organizing condition of possibility for historical subjectivity, as well as a locus for forms of subjection or subjugation. For Piper, visual images are not, or not only, always already corrupted signs participating in the spectacle that is capitalism; they can also be the site for significant identifications particularly for those subjects who are interpellated by them and can recognize themselves in specific histories of embodiment.

The face

Underlying Hansen's basic argument is a hopeful interest in the possibility that some kind of unprecedented ethical relation might emerge from the anonymity—the facelessness—of the Internet and other forms of new media. He turns to the notions of the "improper" and the "whatever body" from the writings of Giorgio Agamben in order to argue for digital media's potential to produce the conditions for the emergence of an identity-less, subject-less singularity, citing the following passage from *The Coming Community*, "… If humans could, that is, not be-thus in this or that particular biography, but be only *the* thus, their sin-

gular exteriority and their face, then they would for the first time enter into a community without presuppositions and without subjects, into a communication without the incommunicable."[34] Agamben suggests, in essence, the utopian possibility of human encounter that relies on a kind of purity of presence, where all else (history, memory, gender, race and class) falls away. Counter-intuitively, for Agamben "the face" is not the human visage in its material presence, but rather what he calls an opening to communicability. He writes, "There is a face wherever something reaches the level of exposition and tries to grasp its own being exposed, wherever a being that appears sinks in that appearance and has to find a way out of it. (Thus art can give a face even to an inanimate object … and it may be that nowadays the entire Earth, which has been transformed into a desert by humankind's blind will, might become one single face.)"[35] For Agamben, "the face" is a restless power, a threshold, a simultaneity and being-together of the manifold "visages" constituting it; it is the duality of communication and communicability, of potential and act. It seems, therefore, to be both the form and the function of signification. Yet it is also an ontological or existential state. He writes, "in the face I exist with all of my properties (my being brown, tall, pale, proud, emotional…); but this happens without any of these properties essentially identifying me or belonging to me."[36] Agamben wants us to be able to imagine the unique character of each human subject without limiting this uniqueness to surface representations, to the limits of particular resemblances between people, to the frameworks of socially defined characteristics. He not only wants us to be able to imagine this state but also to somehow voluntarily achieve it. He writes in the imperative: "Be only your face. Go to the threshold.

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[34] Hansen, p. 110.

[35] Giorgio Agamben, "The Face," *Means Without End: Notes on Politics* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 63.

[36] Giorgio Agamben, "Without Classes" in *The Coming Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 98.

Do not remain the subject of your properties or faculties, do not stay beneath them; rather, go with them, in them, beyond them."[37]

Artist Nancy Burson's *Human Race Machine* echoes Agamben's call, but replaces the universal singularity of the subject with universal sameness, emphasizing the physical and racial properties of humans in an effort to precisely erase or transcend their significance. The artwork combines a complicated viewing-booth apparatus with a patented morphing technology that will transform a snapshot portrait of the user into a series of racially distinct replicas. A digital algorithm adjusts bone structure, skin tone, and eye shape, automatically reproducing the same face with a range of facial features, which is then displayed on the computer screen as a row of uncanny doppelgangers. Burson claims that the *Human Race Machine* is her "prayer for racial equality" and suggests, "There is only one race, the human one."[38] "The more we recognize ourselves in others," Burson writes, "the more we can connect to the human race."[39] Her work adheres to the same conception of race as primarily a concern with visual appearance found in Hansen, but she reverses the importance of the image in the production of a universal subject. The power of visual representation, for Burson, lies in its ability to produce forms of cross-racial identification, whereas for Hansen visual representations of race are always already corrupted by their ideological history and therefore cannot be used productively as sites of identification.

Burson also claims, "the *Human Race Machine* allows us to move beyond differences and arrive at sameness."[40] Despite her progressive intentions, Burson's desire to "move beyond differences and arrive at sameness" seems strangely undone by the

[37] Ibid., p. 99.
[38] Nancy Burson, www.nancyburson.com/human_fr.html, accessed March 21, 2008.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid.

artwork itself. Instead of Burson's promise of greater human sameness, the *Human Race Machine* appears to offer a thinly veiled fantasy of *difference*. In presenting the argument that "there is no gene for race," the *Human Race Machine* allows the user to engage in what Lisa Nakamura might call "identity tourism." As a form of temporary racial tourism, Burson's machine may make the process of cross racial identification appear plausible, but its artificiality does nothing to reveal how people live their lives, or even how they engage with cyberspace. To be more specific, the *Human Race Machine* does not offer users any insight into the privileges or discriminations that attend racial difference, such as the experience of being ignored by taxis or denied housing, being harassed by the police, receiving unfair legal representation, or having one's very life threatened. Instead, it offers users a kind of false promise of universality through the *visual mechanics* of race. By using the face as a device that is ultimately mutable and theoretically non-identitarian, she shows how any face (this time the actual visage) might become like any other face, any *whatever* face, and by doing so implies that the racial discourses attached to those signs will fall away. Like Agamben, Burson invites us to attend to our physical traits, our "properties," in order that we might transcend them. Yet both fail to attend to the social and political constraints that might impede this transcendence.

In contrast, Franz Fanon has eloquently theorized the involuntary condition of *epidermalization* that precisely interrupts the concrete possibility of being *only* one's "face" (in Agamben's sense) because of one's racially defined, physical "visage."[41] Fanon describes the moment when he realized his own "properties" were in fact created by others writing, "below the corporeal schema I had sketched a historico-racial schema. The elements that I used had been provided for me … by the other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes,

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[41] Fanon, p. 11.

stories."[42]As Delan Mahendran nicely summarizes, for Fanon "the racial-epidermal schema is the interior horizon of self and others in immediate perceptual experience of the world. The racial epidermal schema impacts a black person's tacit sense of self. The racial epidermal schema immediately in play is the phenomena of appearing or showing up as black in an anti-black world."[43] When Agamben suggests, "there is a face wherever something reaches the level of exposition and tries to grasp its own being exposed, wherever a being that appears sinks in that appearance and has to find a way out of it," he reveals the very fact of a subject who is undergoing the process of exposition, that is, of being defined, of being explained, framed, delimited, and exposed as an *appearance*, and who is trying to grasp this exposition. One might say that this is an insightful description of the very process of racial formation, of epidermalization, or of subjection *per se*. But for those human subjects who are constantly *enclosed into* these properties or faculties by *others*, Agamben's call to "go with them, in them, beyond them" seems not only utopian (literally appropriate for a space that does not exist) but also blind to the conditions by which humans subjects are, indeed, produced through elaborately constructed discourses and relations with *other* humans. These discourses and relations are designed to prevent precisely this voluntary opening of "the face," to *prevent* any movement beyond racial particularity. Perhaps this is why Agamben, to his credit, frames his argument as a conditional statement that marks the edge of the possible: if humans *could* be only "their face"—that is, exist in a state of utter openness and non-identity—then they might for the *first* time enter into a "community without presuppositions." Agamben's approach to ethics is ultimately privileged in origin and messianic in structure, working toward a future point of unknowable possibility without

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[42] Fanon, p. 111.

[43] Delan Mahendran, "The Facticity of Blackness," *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*, Vol. 5 (Summer 2007): pp. 191–204, p. 198.

attending in any depth to the material conditions of difference in the present.

Writing before Agamben, Emmanuel Levinas elaborated "the face" as the critical site of human ethical encounter. For Levinas, the absolute infinity of the Other, legible in the physical presence of the face, simultaneously manages to appear within and exceed this material frame. Levinas foregrounds his ambivalence concerning visual knowledge by opening his discussion of "Ethics and the Face" in *Totality and Infinity* by stating, "inasmuch as the access to beings concerns vision, it dominates those beings, exercises a power over them."[44] He goes on to explain how the face is the condition for the visibility of the other *as* Other, and the origin for the opportunity to enter into speech and discourse. He writes, "the idea of infinity is produced in the opposition of conversation, in sociality. The relation with the face, with the other absolutely other which I cannot contain, the other in this sense infinite, is nonetheless my Idea, a commerce."[45] We can see clear parallels with Agamben's theorizing of the face, which is clearly indebted to Levinas, but the latter seems to be more attuned to the involuntary nature of this coming into relation via the face-to-face encounter and to the responsibility and possible fraternity that emerges from this. He writes, "One has to respond to one's right to be, not by referring to some abstract and anonymous law, or judicial entity, but because of one's fear of the Other. My being-in-the-world or my 'place in the sun,' my being at home, have these not also been the usurpation of spaces belonging to the other man whom I have already oppressed or starved, or driven out into a third world; are they not acts of repulsing, excluding, exiling, stripping, killing?"[46] Even given this somber revelation that the encounter with the Other, with

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[44] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: an essay on exterority*, translated by Alphonse Lingus (Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 1969) p. 194.

[45] Ibid, p. 197.

[46] Emmanuel Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy," in *The Levinas Reader*, Seán Hand (ed.) (Oxford, UK; Cambridge, MA, USA: B. Blackwell, 1989).

"the face," is not a pure state of abstracted unity but also always grounded in the conditions of history and contingency, Levinas is not without hope that the radical and uncontainable Otherness that appears in face-to-face encounters can nevertheless be maintained "without violence, in peace with this absolute alterity. The resistance of the other does not do violence to me, does not act negatively; it has a positive structure: ethical."[47] While Agamben grounds the possibility of ethical encounters through an *erasure* of difference, Levinas grounds it *through* difference, writing, "the face resists possession, resists my powers."[48] It is this very resistance that allows us to recognize the infinity of the Other who always exists beyond and in excess of the mechanisms (whether visual or discursive, historical or taxonomic) which we might use to frame or delimit it. More to the point, our own historicity depends upon the Other, our situatedness becomes defined by having to answer to and for histories which we may not have previously conceived as our own.

In contrast to Nancy Burson's *Human Race Machine*, which works to produce a form of seamless identification in her audience through the visual production of racial *equivalence*, the British-Jamaican artist collective Mongrel (Graham Harwood, Mervin Jarman, Matsuko Yokokoji, Richard Pierre Davis and Matthew Fuller) leverages the iconicity of the face to elicit a structure of *ambivalence*. Their print and online project *Colour Separation* (1997) offered users the opportunity to encounter masked subjects who posed as imaginary projections of racial types. Each of the composite images consisted of a simple frontal head shot of a man or woman upon which a smaller photographic mask of a different racial type was apparently sewn, revealing the eyes and mouth of the subject underneath. Produced with their own morphing software, strategically named "Heritage Gold," the images were compiled from over one hundred photographs of people who were somehow connected to the core

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[47] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 197.
[48] Ibid, p. 193.

members of the art group into eight racial stereotypes. Echoing the processes of composite photography used in the early twentieth century to define criminal and racial types, these images emerged as the sign of the impossible referent—that is, they signified subjects who do not exist except in digital form, and in the imagination of those who created them. The phrase "color separation" also refers to an image processing technique that entails creating separate screens (magenta, cyan, black and yellow) for color image printing—an artificial and mechanical process not unlike racial categorization.

The layering of a racially distinct mask on top of the face implied not one but two subjects defined both by difference and intimacy, by their mutual interdependence and potential interchange. These double portraits reappeared in Mongrel's installation *National Heritage* (1999) with a dynamic, interactive element: by clicking on individual faces the user added another layer, of spit. These unexpected marks, not immediately legible as saliva, marred the surface of the face. At the same time, a voice recounted in some detail a personal narrative of everyday racial abuse, of which the spit was a visual sign. In drawing out the complexity of human race relations—its micro-violence and the inescapable complicity of every viewer—the work functions as a disruptive device in the ongoing experiments of race discourse. By naming its specialized morphing software Heritage Gold, Mongrel played off the rather insidious euphemistic term "heritage," used in British culture typically to signify the preservation of a white, English patrimony. Rachel Green observes, "based on the ubiquitous graphics software Adobe Photoshop, Heritage Gold replaces its banal tools and commands ('Enlarge,' 'Flatten') with terms pregnant with racial and class significance ('Define Breed,' 'Paste into Host Skin,' 'Rotate World View')." [49] Pull-down menus allow users to transform photographic images accord-

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[49] Rachel Green, "Web Work: A history of Internet Art," *Art Forum*, No. 9 (May, 2000): pp. 162–167, 190.

ing to racial types such as East Indian, Chinese and Caucasian. Such designations reveal the strange equation of national identities with racial identities and seem to parallel the kind of morphing fantasies and identity tourism found in Nancy Burson's *Human Race Machine*. One crucial difference is that Heritage Gold is free, unpatented, shareware that allows users to produce these visual manipulations and transformations themselves rather than imposing a homogenizing algorithm on all participants. Both *Colour Separation* and Heritage Gold software engage not merely the question of racism as a complex, multi-participant event without immediate remedy; both also emphasize the ways in which this condition is mediated by visibility and invisibility. Graham Harwood writes, "in this work as in the rest of society we perceive the demonic phantoms of other 'races.' But these characters never existed just like the nigger bogeyman never existed. But sometimes... reluctantly we have to depict the invisible in order to make it disappear."[50] As Lisa Nakamura has observed, "women and racial and ethnic minorities create visual cultures on the popular Internet that speak to and against existing graphical environments and interfaces online. Surveys of race and the 'digital divide' that fail to measure digital production in favor of measuring access or consumption cannot tell the whole story, or even part of it."[51]

*Colour Separation* has received attention from a number of scholars including Mark Hansen and Wendy Chun. Hansen's book *New Philosophy for New Media* includes an analysis of *Colour Separation* that suggests quite rightly that the work "compels the viewer to confront the power of racial stereotypes at a more fundamental level than that of representation; it aims to get under the viewers skin, to catalyze a reaction that might

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[50] Harwood, www.mongrel.org.uk/colourseparation, accessed March 31, 2008.

[51] Lisa Nakamura, *Digitizing Race, Visual Cultures on the Internet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), p. 172.

possibly lead to a loosening up of the sedimented layers of habitual, embodied racism."[52] Chun's book *Control and Freedom* raises some important and provocative questions about *National Heritage,* pointing out that "making users spit may expose our relation to another's pain, but it also flattens differences between users. Also, making the "faces" speak after being spit on exposes the ways in which the other speaks its truth in response to the demands of the would-be user/subject, but forecloses the possibility of silence and refusal."[53] This important observation reminds us that the lack of freedom, flexibility, and choice in the software may not only mimic similar restrictions that exist in the world at large; this lack can also repress the forms of resistance existing there as well. Yet the fact that solutions and reconciliations are not presented in *Color Separation* should not be read as a form of cynicism or simple *ressentiment.* By drawing out the impasses and intersections of human race relations, the work functions as a salutary disruptive device that more closely approximates a Levinasian ethics in which the resistance to possession takes place in the public domain of cyberspace.

Common to all of these examples is the logic of the face as a visible threshold to the domain of communication, and ultimately to a practice of ethics. In the long tradition of portraiture, so thoroughly theorized in the history of art, the face is the object of public encounter, a device that mediates the historicity of the subject and its interior character. As many scholars have argued, the portrait and the face are primarily rhetorical, functioning like speech acts in both argument and address.[54] Sharing an etymology with facade, the face is architectural in its features, and potentially false in its design. This is the lure and disappointment of the face, both for the early twentieth-century eugenicist who

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[52] Ibid, p. 148.

[53] Wendy Chun, *Control and Freedom: Power and paranoia in the age of fiber optics* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006), p. 167.

[54] Görel Gavalli-Björkman, *Face to Face: Portraits from Five Centuries* (Stockholm: Natioanl Museum, 2002), p. 141.

hopes to discover in the features of the face the proof of racial superiority, and for the artist who hopes to capture in a glance or profile the essence of identity. At the bureaucratic level, however, the face guarantees legal status, defines passport control, and provides the focus of most surveillance and security technologies. As Sandy Narine observes, "In a future presumed by many thinkers to involve digital enhancement, electronic recording and constant surveillance, the technology of recognition (attributed to increased security pressures) promises to make the science of the face an arena for further work and development."[55]

As the most reproduced visual sign on the Internet, the face continues to operate as the threshold to public space. Facebook, the largest social networking site on the Internet with more than eighty million registered members, has uploaded more than four billion images in the past four years.[56] Ninety percent of the profiles on Facebook contain an image; most are faces. Each face is presented as one point in a nexus of other faces, each with its own extending network, creating vast pools of tenuous social links that grow exponentially. Unlike the portraits of previous eras, depicting wealth or fame, the faces on Facebook depict anyone who can follow the simple uploading directions on the website. More importantly, the face is no longer presented as singular and isolated, but becomes the ultimate origin of other faces; always defined by, surrounded by, and in some way guaranteed by the visual presence of others. The meaning of the Facebook face is not limited to facial features, to the facade, but extends to the other faces to which it is linked. Within multiple trajectories of signification, the face enlivens and mobilizes social connections that become much more significant than the photographic representation

[55] Sandy Narine, "Introduction," *The Portrait Now* (London: The National Portrait Gallery), pp. 7–16, 15.

[56] Nicole B. Ellison, Charles Steinfield, Cliff Lampe, "The Benefits of Facebook Friends: Social Capital and College Students' Use of Online Social Network Sites," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 12 (2007): pp. 1143–1168, 1153.

of individuals. Yet race and class still play a role in the way Facebook and other sites, like Myspace, construct networks of inclusion and exclusion, such that membership and a sense of belonging are already circumscribed via categories existing in the culture at large.[57]

The public secret

The desire to locate a universal quality in human subjects or the allure of forms of universal address (the two are not the same, but the latter frequently presupposes the former), is probably tied to a will to eradicate not merely individual differences, but any difference that is believed to create an impediment to public action, public consensus, or communication. Race has traditionally been thought of as a "quality" of individuals, therefore reducible by Agamben and other theorists, like Hansen, to a property or mere set of appearances that one can theoretically "move beyond." But race is not a *property*; it is a *relation of public encounter*.

These relations of encounter were the subject of artist Keith Obadike's performance and conceptualization of "blackness" in his playful and well-known project *Keith Obadike's Blackness* (2001), wherein he proposed to sell his "blackness" to the highest bidder on eBay. While the work clearly referenced the history of slavery when black bodies stood on the public auction block, Obadike was nevertheless careful not to equate his cultural Blackness (with a capital "B") with a black body made visible. By not including a photograph of himself, Obadike thwarted the common expectation that objects for sale on eBay will be visible on line—further underscoring the difference between the concept of "Blackness" and physical traits assigned to the term, specifically skin color. On an actual eBay page, the artist described

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[57] Zeynep Tufekci, "Grooming, Gossip, Facebook and Myspace: What can we learn about these sites from those who won't assimilate?" *Information, Communication & Society*, Volume 11, Issue 4 (June 2008), pp. 544–564. See also "Migration From MySpace To Facebook Shows Class Divide," TECH-WEB, June 26, 2007 Tuesday 3:00 PM GMT.

the object for sale, stating that this "heirloom has been in the possession of the seller for twenty-eight years" and that it "may be used for creating black art," "writing critical essays or scholarship about other blacks," "dating a black person without fear of public scrutiny," and, among other rights, "securing the right to use the terms 'sista', 'brotha', or 'nigga' in reference to black people." Certain warnings also apply: for example, the seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used "during legal proceedings of any sort," "while making intellectual claims," "while voting in the United States or Florida," or "by whites looking for a wild weekend."[58]

Obadike toys with the idea that "Blackness" is a commodity that can be bought and sold for the purpose of cultural passing, tapping into a long-standing fantasy in the history of race politics of crossing the "color line." But the artist also writes, "This Blackness may be used to augment the blackness of those already black, especially for purposes of playing 'blacker-than-thou.'" Structured around the perceived desires of others to occupy or "own" Blackness even if they are already black, Obadike's project brings out the hierarchies operative in cultural conceptions of racial identities while revealing the social inequities that always attend Blackness in the United States. The artist uses humor to reveal the daily pain and the ubiquity of racism that revolves around the concept of "blackness;" yet also demonstrates the impossibility of selling oneself out of being "black," with all of its attendant advantages and disadvantages, both personal and systemic.

Rather than presenting the Internet as an ideal place to racially "pass," *Keith Obadike's Blackness* addresses relations of comodification, wherein aspects of performativity are not simply a question of shifting appearances but a set of cultural expectations that inflect ethical, political, and social relations with others on and off line. If any user can join Second Life and pay to accessorize their avatar with racially specific visual signs, Obadike's project reminds

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[58] For a link to this page see http://obadike.tripod.com/ebay.html.

us of the purely phantasmatic nature of this commodity relation to race that takes place in the "public sphere" of the Internet. It also reveals the involuntary (i.e. inherited) relations of discursive inclusion and exclusion attending the concept of "Blackness" as set of obstacles and choices for those who are perceived as black, and by implication those who perceive others as black.

The use of eBay as the quintessential market place, as the site of the public or of "publicity," demonstrates not the demos of the Internet as public sphere, but a platform for what Jodi Dean and Paul Passavant call communicative capitalism, which is the condition by which technoculture works in the interest of capital growth while appearing to enhance public access to information and communication.[59] Communicative capitalism leverages the public space of the Internet for its own ends while advertising this space as a site of democratic potential. Obadike's work draws attention to the Internet as a site of communicative possibility while simultaneously leveraging its publicity to display "private"—that is, "individual"—experiences of race, reminding us that "Blackness" and the race politics associated with it are precisely *not* individual, but entirely public, relational and important elements of today's communicative capitalism.

In her book *Publicity's Secret: How Technoculture Capitalizes on Democracy,* Jodi Dean observes that our widespread differences in culture, practice, language, information, race, status, religion, and education in the world (and especially in online digital culture) preclude the possibility that "the public" can refer to "all of us." Why, then, does the idea of "the public" persist? For Dean "the public" is symbolic; it may not exist in fact, but it still has real social effects both in political thought and in law. For these discourses, "the public" is a central organizing trope commonly contrasted with "the private" such that the borders of this demarcation are the subject of theory, debate, and controversy. Dean shifts this opposition by proposing another: that between

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[59] Jodi Dean, *Publicity's Secret: How Technoculture Capitalizes on Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 117.

"the public" and "the secret." Dean writes, "Few contemporary accounts of publicity acknowledge the secret. Instead they adopt a spatial model of a social world divided between public and private spheres. For the most part, the accounts claim either priority of the one or the other ignoring the system of distrust, the circuit of concealment and revelation, which actively generates the public. To this extent they seem unable to theorize the power of publicity, the compulsion to disclose and the drive to survey…."[60] The "other" of the public is not the private but the hidden, the unknown, even the unknowable. The secret is both the object of desire and fascination and the threat to the coherence of the public as homogeneous, open, knowable condition of universal participation.

Publicity requires secrets, for Dean, insofar as the secret maps the limit of public discourse. Secrecy is always a public fact. Revealing secrets is one of the goals of publicity, but producing secrets is another goal. Power resides in what people conceal as well as what they reveal, whether as part of the hegemony or the subaltern classes. Race and other forms of cultural difference have been historically presented as secret unknowns that require definition, mapping, measuring, and legislating by those in power in order to render them public. Race both constitutes and is constituted by the public. Race produces a form of resistance to ideals of the public because it stands as a marker of difference that stubbornly resists transformation or incorporation. Race serves as an aspect of secrecy in the logic of publicity, but as an already publicly constructed discourse, its secrets are plainly evident. This is its fundamental contradiction. As Homi Bhabha has observed, "The fetish of colonial discourse—what Fanon calls the epidermal schema—is not, like the sexual fetish, a secret. Skin, as the key signifier of cultural and racial difference in the stereotype is the most visible of fetishes, recognized as 'common knowledge' in a range of cultural, political and historical discourses, and plays a public part in the racial drama that is

[60] Dean, p. 44.

enacted every day in colonial societies."[61] Racial schemas work to hide or mask not only individuals *as* individuals but also their real and imagined historical conditions.

If racial difference has frequently accompanied an emerging relation of imperial or colonial domination and violence, and a resulting economic and social asymmetry that profoundly mark our present moment, the humans living through this history have been, and continue to be, produced in radically different ways *from each other* and thus remain *mysterious* to each other. The sign of this mystery on the body, through the skin, elicits a general suspicion and curiosity. A fascination and compulsion to know or to reveal the mystery (which is the past), is countered by a simultaneous desire *not* to know this past. This ambivalent condition guards against the memory of the historical meaning of race. Hence, as David Marriot observes in his book *Haunted Life*, the fearful projections accompanying the gaze that produces the raced subject are always haunted by the past, but "what haunts is not so much the imago spun through with myths, anecdotes, stories, but the shadow or stain that is sensed behind it and that disturbs well-being."[62]

The philosophical imperative for a homogeneous universal subject, without racial or cultural specificity, who might therefore properly participate in a "neutral" public sphere can be seen as a demand for subjects not only to reveal their secrets, but to find ways to live without them; in other words, to find ways not to be *disturbing*. Jodi Dean argues that while the Internet may indeed provide one site for democratic politics, it does not constitute a public sphere (particularly in the Habermasian sense of equal access and homogeneous participation). In fact, she suggests that the public sphere, with all of its structure of spectacle, suspicion, or celebrity is the wrong model for understanding

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[61] Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London, New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 78.

[62] David Marriot, *Haunted Life: Visual Culture and Black Modernity* (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2007), p. 2.

political process or democracy, especially within technoculture; rather, she suggests that we conceive of the web as an intersecting nexus of "issue networks" that produce "neo-democracies," borrowing these terms from Richard Rogers and Noorjte Marres.[63] For Dean, traditional "public sphere" models rely on the nation as a site, consensus as a goal, rationality as a means, and individual actors as a vehicle, whereas the "neo-democracy" model relies on the web as a kind of zero or neutral institution with contestation as a goal, networked conflict as a means, and the issues themselves (rather than individual actors) as a vehicle.[64]

In different ways, Piper, Mongrel, and Obadike offer visions of race discourse as embedded in the domain of the public yet, like Dean, they eschew the ideal of a Habermasian public sphere. They instead examine the domain of technoculture with a healthy suspicion of the forms by which race discourse can be reproduced within it, particularly as a new form of capital or as an object of surveillance. For Piper, the public is an archive to be mapped, and an obstacle course to be run. For Obadike, the public is a set of social abilities and constraints that demonstrate their own status as non-commodifiable through the failed act of their attempted sale. For Mongrel, the public is an uneven terrain where unpredictable encounters can result in confrontation and transformation, but never final resolution. The kind of visual artifacts they produce offer alternatives to the hegemony of the images found elsewhere on the Internet, and they participate in the kind of critical discourse important to any neo-democracy.

We can conclude that it is not yet possible to decouple race discourse as an oppressive regime from vision or the visible, and that visual culture (both on and off line) is the very place where contemporary race discourse might be most powerfully critiqued and transformed. As Judith Butler has written,

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[63] Dean, p. 170.

[64] Following Zizek and Levi-Strauss Dean suggests the web is a zero institution: an empty signifier that in itself has no determinate meaning but that signifies the presence of meaning.

The media representations of the faces of the "enemy" efface what is most human about the "face" for Lévinas. Through a cultural transposition of his philosophy, it is possible to see how dominant forms of representation can and must be disrupted for something about the precariousness of life to be apprehended. This has implications once again for the boundaries that constitute what will and will not appear within public life, the limits of a publicly acknowledged field of appearance. Those who remain faceless or whose faces are presented to us as so many symbols of evil, authorize us to become senseless before those lives we have eradicated, and whose grievablity is indefinitely postponed. Certain faces must be admitted into public view, must be seen and heard for some keener sense of the value of life, all life to take hold.[65]

The idea of a neo-democracy, with its emphasis on contestation and conflict centered on political issues rather than a consensus model addressing universal subjects might be a more appealing ideal, not only for the interactions of cyberspace, but also for the lived politics of our everyday lives.

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[65] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), p. xviii.

# Public Privations: Notes about Private Acts and Public Spaces

Shuddhabrata Sengupta

### The public-private conundrum

The fifteenth century mausoleum of a dead Afghan monarch in a New Delhi public garden is perhaps the unlikeliest of private spaces. Here, along with an itinerant vendor of snacks and savories taking a breather on a hot summer afternoon and truant schoolboys, are a clutch of courting couples, a conspiracy of stolen intimacies, quiet seductions and secret trysts, ransomed from the grip of a heartless city: a collection of very private moments in very public spaces. They leave their inscriptions on the walls, defiant declarations of desire that annotate the ornamental and sacred stucco calligraphy on the arches—"Raju loves Sunita," "Miriam loves Nusrat," "I love you Ram Dhan," "Rani + Rana = Sweethearts Forever."

Privacy and affection, separately or together, never come cheap in the crowded city where I live. Public displays of affection are not necessarily encouraged in Delhi and only the well to do can afford the luxury of seclusion in love. Rooftop apartments with independent entrances in family owned town houses, love nests in hotels, the back seats of capacious SUVs, weekend getaways in hill station guest houses, or keys to the flats of pliant friends are conveniences that few can access. And those who can

can also go to clubs, bars and parties where public displays of affection do not lead to instant assault. The public that displays its affections to its own charmed circle finds ways to do so behind high walls, high cover charges and high gates with vigilant watchmen in attendance.

They do not carve love letters on the tombs of forgotten kings. They do not tarry at the milk booth to catch someone's eye, or make small talk across rooftops in a squatter settlement while hanging out clothes to dry. They do not take long rides on the afternoon bus that takes them nowhere close to where they live, or work, or study, because the space of the bus ride is also the only time in which to have a conversation, uninterrupted, veiled by an invisible film of brave indifference, a duet of averted gazes that guards against the mocking stares of co-passengers.

The abandoned cenotaph, the river-front walkway, the downtown underpass, the ruined urban fortress, the crowded or empty bus, the broken-down playground, the shade of a generous tree, the derelict back street of a commercial complex, the corner seat in the cinema that only shows B movies, the street-corner snack stall, the park bench, the dank corridors of public toilets and the steps of a public library: all are spaces rife with presences, riddled with curious gazes, awash with the traffic of millions of human beings that become theatres of urban intimacy for millions of people in cities like Delhi. Here, Public and Private Life become contagious, contiguous, continuous facets of the same messy reality. Public architecture and the accidents of urban planning yield themselves to the steadfast pressure of private life.

The private life of the public street

People fall in love, have sex, are born, defecate, cook, eat, sleep, work, play, read, sing, dance, pray, curse, quarrel, fight, riot, go mad, get possessed, enter trance states, cry, laugh, fall sick, get drunk, get arrested, get shot, get run over, and die on the street. The street is heaven and hell, factory and prison, morgue and

nursery, market and office, boutique and salon, club and bar, library and university, high court and parliament, shrine and brothel, school and playground. The street is the city, the world, the bed you take your lover to. The street is the epic that people narrate their life into. The street is cruel and generous and indifferent and curious and concerned and hostile. The street is the hyphen that conjoins every public stance to every private longing. The street redeems every privation, hears every prayer and kicks every dream into the gutter. It should come as no surprise then, that often the most intensely emotional, even melodramatic moments in Hindi cinema are precisely those that get to be staged on the street. Here, in full public view, the most intense desires, the most painful humiliations, the darkest anger, the greatest joy, the strongest love and the most profound loneliness find their fullest expression. The street is where the public act and the private motive get to know each other.

A phone tap of a conversation on a crowded Delhi street between a Kashmiri lecturer in Arabic in Delhi University and his stepbrother in Kashmir about why his wife is not going back to her maternal home for a few days becomes evidence in a terrorism show-trial, and the cornerstone of proof of a so-called conspiracy to attack the Indian parliament that prompts the largest military mobilization since the Second World War. Its words, which point to banal domestic issues, are twisted and mistranslated to mean justifications of a terrorist attack. A very private conversation gets construed, retrospectively as a very public statement.

A call centre worker in India, when catering to North American customers, is often expected to take on a different 'private identity'—Sunita, becomes Susan, her place of work and residence gliding over time zones. The weather report on her computer tells her of the climate in another part of the world, which she makes her own as she slips into a different accent to deal with her client. In the course of her conversation, she invokes her client's credit history, purchase decisions, and other private information.

The shift between one private identity and another, and negotiating the contours of an 'other's' (the client's) private life, is the ground on which her public persona as a worker in the service sector of the global new economy is constructed.

### Different histories, different publics

The neat separation between public and private existence that is supposed to attend to the rise of the modern individual in the notionally European centre-stage of world history has never quite been able to live up to its own premises in South Asian societies. It does not do so today.

Yet even in Europe, historically, the distinction between public and private has tended to break down the moment deviations from prescribed moral codes have occurred—thus behaviour outside the appropriate norms of marital heterosexuality has tended to invite public punitive intervention even if it has occurred in private spaces, between consenting individuals. The division ordained by the law and by moral conventions between crimes and vices (which are offences without victims) in the nineteenth century, and which remained operational through much of the twentieth century, suggested that an individual's act in the privacy of his or her own presence, or in the presence of other individuals, is not devoid of public consequences, when it represents a deviation from marital heterosexuality.

It is one of the strange ironies of post-colonial societies that these European (and deeply Christian), hetero-normative injunctions regulating 'private' behaviour and sexuality through publicly laid down norms, which arrived in non-European cultures as 'innovations' have now become the mainstay of cultural conservatism in the same non-European societies. Hindu and Islamic fundamentalists both lead virulent campaigns against gays and lesbians in the name of tradition, neglecting to examine the actual historical record of South Asian and Islamicate societies. In a remarkable act of cultural amnesia, the traditional liberality in the realm of the erotic and the

sexual is forgotten to make way for a recent prudery that is then apotheosized as a newly constituted mark of 'traditional' morality. This too has consequences on the relationship between private and public life in societies such as ours.

The terms 'public' and 'private' can then be seen more as place holders for concepts that change their content over time, than as actual descriptions of ways of inhabiting space.

Having said this, it is not altogether fruitless to explore how different societies have realized the distinction in spatial terms. If the post-Renaissance European model of the public square, the public institutional building, the public park, the public street and the very private homestead is an instance of a neat binary operation, then, other societies and cultures have found other methods of articulating the public-private relationship. The rise of modernity in non-western societies has seen an overlay between different models of publicness and privacy. It is possible, then, for an individual to simultaneously inhabit an exclusively 'public' realm as derived from a European heritage, and a 'public-private' continuum that is more porous and flexible.

Traditionally, South Asian cultures have tended to arrange public and private aspects of life in a series of overlapping and concentric circles. Courtyards and kitchens, terraces and pavements, encroachments and annexes constantly re-position the line that separates public and private life by giving rise to permanently provisional zones of liminality.

### The outsideness of inside – considerations on domesticity

The structure of a traditional North Indian 'big' house, with its different entrances and exits for different kinds of people—its 'meeting room' (the 'baithak' or 'majlis') where menfolk do business and conduct public affairs, its inner and outer courtyards, its shrine, the 'andar mahal' (where the women of the household can go unveiled), the capacious beds that make room for more than a couple, the secret niches and hidden passages, or concealed staircases, go-downs and attics that become play-

grounds of intimacy, the roof that can be the bedchamber under the sky on summer nights and the back garden overlooking a well or a pond—is a complex zone where different articulations of publicness and privacy are bound by rigid rules. However, these rules are rigid not in terms of the separation between publicness and privacy, but in terms of which one is applicable to whom and in what context. Let us take for instance the example of the 'women's quarters'—here, the ritualized segregation of the sexes prohibits women from being exposed to adult men and the 'public realm' that such men inhabit. But in many ways, the 'inner palace' or the 'andar mahal' is the most intense conduit of news and information from the outside world. Here, the gossip and rumours of the neighbourhood, of the court, of the city and the district, conveyed by servants, artisans, nurses, friends and relatives, circulated with remarkable felicity. The women of the harem and the traditional household, though veiled, in *pardah*, in notional seclusion from the world outside, would often be more 'conversant' with what went on in the world than even the busy public men who dabbled in the affairs of the world from their noisy *baithaks* and meeting rooms. Often female power, excercised from the depths of private space, from within the innermost folds of domestic interiority, was able to change the course of outer, public events because it had access to unofficial, informal channels of information and communication. The commerce between ostensibly public and officially private would often lead to subtle alterations of the balance of power between them, with private acts leading on occasion to very public consequences.

There is no archive, or history of private life. All that we glean of private moments come to us from lived experience, and from stories, from proverbs and songs, from myths and parables told by women, servants and old men to children. This is how many of us grow up to understand love and loss, longing and belonging, cunning and compassion, courage and discretion and all the

things that you need to have a sense of to lead a life that con-
stantly fluctuates between public and private registers.

If the public sphere is the realm of history, and private life the
domain of interiority, then history and interiority get constantly
dovetailed into each other in all sorts of complicated ways.
Dreams, longings, revelations, instances of amazement and other
intensely individuated instances become the foundations of
public acts, performances, pronouncements and positions. Natu-
rally, this leads to anxieties about propriety and appropriateness,
and typically, disputes about behaviour in public spaces tend to
be about the fact that the actors concerned were seen to be acting
in a manner that demonstrated their lack of regard for the 'pub-
licness' of the space. In other words, they were acting as if the
'street' were their 'bedroom.' This objection to the inappropriate
transposition of modes of behaviour is complicated by the fact
that often the 'street' is also the 'bedroom,' but that apart, what it
is also challenged by is the fact that the models of 'public perso-
na' and 'private self' that it is based on may not be consonant
with the modes of living and acting of many people.

Public mourning and private grief

Thus, the exhibition and display of grief, a very private emotion,
through rituals of lament and self-mortification in very public
'Moharram' processions by Shia Muslims in India are often
instances where the whole 'public-private' conundrum gets
sharply exposed. The last week of February, 2007, saw low inten-
sity Shia Sunni clashes in Lucknow, a north Indian city, as the
Shia Moharram procession, with 'taaziyeh' was attacked yet
again, as it passed through Sunni neighbourhoods.

For the majority Sunni Muslim community, and many non-
Muslims, the rituals of Shia mourning are seen as 'the private
affair of that community'. For Shias the mourning is meaningless
if it is not 'performed' in public view. Rivulets of private grief
mingle to form a very public lament, which reinforces the sense
of identity of a people that sees itself as a beleaguered communi-

ty, as a minority within a minority. That the performances of mourning also often entail the making of ritualized accusations against important Sunni personages is a bone of contention that ignites Shia-Sunni friction with repetetive regularity. Here, the private grief, of Shia individuals, the 'private affair', of the Shia community, and the space of the street, where these are made public—come together explosively. Peculiarly, Shia Sunni riots over Moharram are very modern phenomena, and they date precisely to the moment where public spaces were seen as somehow separate and distinct from private life. The argument is as follows, if the street is a public space, then it is inappropriate that it be used for private purposes. If private claims are made on that public space, however temporarily, then they are likely to come up against counter claims made by other private parties, thus it is best that no private claims whatsoever are made on public space or on public consciousness.

The public space, public consciousness, public realm—is the domain of the secularized, apparently un-marked bourgeoise citizen. The singular error in this operation, however, is that this being actually generalizes his private claims, the very specific conditions of his very limited existence on to a universalizing claim of 'publicness.' It is this subject, everywhere a construct that relies on the tacit expression of majoritarian sentiment, which disguises its particularity under the garb of an *ab initio* ontological universality. In India, this is the abstract figure of the average 'Hindu' who constitutes the normative point of departure for both 'secular' as well as 'sectarian' versions of the script of political citizenship. A variant of this same figure is the abstraction of the 'Indian Muslim'—who tends to conform to the criteria of mainstream 'Sunni' Islam. These are demographic accidents, the inverse of what could be possible in say, Iran, where the 'Shia' patina on the ritualization of citizenship would inflect differently say on Zorastrian or Jewish claims to action in public space, and in the Netherlands,where a raucous demonstration either of Catholic or of undifferentiated Muslim pietry

may be seen as more disturbing of the public peace than even the carnivalesque celebrations by the gay community on Queen's Day, which is now accepted and acceptable within the 'public realm' of contemporary Dutch society.

Quasi-public renditions of acceptable figures are possible, though subject to qualifications, that quarantine them from the 'majority' of the public, in a space designated as temporarily 'public' but for a 'large private purpose.' This is the stuff of negotiation and compromise, of give and take over claims to public space between community representatives and the officials of the law and order apparatus. However, events such as Moharram in North India regularly throw up anomalous figures, neither Hindu nor Sunni Muslim but loudly, lamentingly, embarrassingly Shia, and their claims to 'public space' suddenly constitute a crisis of the secular realm, showing us how tenuous and fragile the foundations of acceptable 'publicness' are. Neither the machinery of the state, nor the 'leaders of the community,' nor the written or unwritten norms of public behaviour are able to deal with such anomalies. Processions start and then deviate from the prescribed routes, the height of *taaziyehs* exceeds that which is normally allowed, crowds of young men do things that they are not supposed to, like flagellate themselves more violently than they are expected to, and women keen their lament at the martyrdom of Husain and Hassan a pitch louder than necessary, and the narrator of the story of Karbala neglects to ask the Sunnis to politely leave the majlis when the turn in the narration necessitates the cursing of the oppressive caliphate.

In each of these cases, the minority is seen at best as 'venting' its private business in public society, and at worst, challenging the (loaded) neutrality of public space with subversive performances of its 'private' identity.

'Unspeakability'

The conditions of public life legislated through law and juridical conventions are ultimately a code and a language unto them-

selves—acceptance of an utterance within the public realm is ultimately a matter of recognition that a speech act or an utterance is intelligible. Yet courts, and a variety of other constituted public spaces, routinely render different kinds of utterance as falling outside the circle of public intelligibility. Various kinds of utterance are processed into the 'unspeakable'. This forces these claims into a silence, interiority, a privation that involves the stripping away of public status, and its reduction to a private and particular place. Thus, the claims of a group of tribals to their land, if expressed through myths and song is seen as unintelligible ritual, unreadable in the domain of evidence and veracity, while the apparatus, staging, role play and paraphernalia of jurisprudence itself is not seen in ritualistic terms. One ritual wins over another precisely by stating that it is not in fact a ritual. The public realm of the courtroom is then an arena where one 'private agenda' (that of modernity and its institutional history) wins over another (a traditional claim to land by a tribal group). Perhaps we would do well to be wary of the fact that many public claims are energized by a complex web of private agendas disguised to the point of invisibility.

### The parable of lions

The symbolic apparatus of the modern Indian nation state borrows heavily from a re-purposed ancient Imperial past. The lion capital of Ashoka, a symbol of imperial power, is today the seal of the Indian state. It features four roaring lions standing in close proximity on a pillar. In conclusion, I would like to offer you a parable of another image of a lion. Sometime in the summer of 2001, while working on a project that would be realized as 'The Co Ordinates of Everyday Life' a multi screen and cross media installation on law, illegality and claims on urban space, we came across and recorded a broken down wall in what had been a central Delhi squatter settlement. The demolition, which was recent and incomplete, had exposed the inner walls of many

makeshift dwellings. One such wall was inscribed with a child's drawing—a large, happy, blue lion.

The lion on the seal of the state roars at the lion on the wall of the makeshift dwelling. The two lions embody two ways in which a city can speak, and yet both speak of the way in which the hands of power transform a landscape. The Imperial Mauryan lion marks urban space with an official order, designating what is legal and what is illegal. This official order comes across a dwelling and demolishes its outer walls, revealing its innermost core, on which stands inscribed a child's happy lion. The broken interior back wall of an 'illegal' home becomes a public wall when the shell of the house is destroyed. An extant law forbids private inscriptions and acts of graffiti on public walls. The happy blue lion, hitherto the hero of a child's fantasy, expressed within the confines of a domestic space, becomes, post-demolition, a private inscription on a public wall. A wall is destroyed, a drawing becomes a fugitive. Private niches yield to the onslaught of public laws, are transformed into public spaces, and then are subject to further scrutiny. In the civil war that rages between the master plan and the moment, the walls of the population must be more circumspect and reticent, in keeping with the urgencies of our times. The privations of the public realm have their own urgent ways of demanding our attention.

### Public/private/peer

In closing, I would like to propose a possible way out of the relentless public-private quandary—by way of urging a consideration of the category of the 'peer' as a counterpoint to the public-private binary. The 'peer group' is not an innocent category: it can be exclusionary towards those outside it, and deeply invasive towards those within it. But perhaps the one thing it does allow is to enable modes of being and acting that are more sympathetic to the demands of inter-subjectivity than the private-public binary can allow for. We know, at least notionally, what public spaces and private spaces are, or could be. What about 'spaces of peerage'—

are they the commons of a transposed inter-subjectivity that allows for a greater porosity between public acts and private intents? Some designs of peerage seem discernible in the structure of online 'peer-to-peer' networks; how might these designs be translated into concrete and offline realms? How might we construct spaces where our private anxieties and public masks can on occasion be held in abeyance, while we construct other modes of interactive being?

# Art Institutions and their Publics: On Relational Strategies

What is the project of an art institution,

and who is its public?

Nina Möntmann

The measure of an art institution is determined substantially by its public standing. By this is meant its relationship with those public groups that attend the museum, talk about it, criticize it, participate in its events and discussions, support the institution and its activities on various levels, associate their name with the agenda of the museum or *kunsthalle*, feel connected to those specifically affiliated with the institution, or otherwise contribute and participate in formal or informal ways.

For many curators and museum directors, these vital relations nowadays seem to be agitated and fragile. On the economic level there is pressure to attract as many people as possible with a populist program, in order to deliver a hefty visitors count to sponsors and politicians. Because of this need, art institutions are increasingly concerned about how they relate to their publics, which is the subject of this chapter.

Today the task of art institutions is determined or at least strongly influenced by their dependence on external and increasingly private funding. In turn, this implies a mission to attract the masses and boost visitor numbers to satisfy funding bodies. Since such institutions by their very nature relate to the general

value system of a society, one could say that the corporate turn in the institutional landscape, which I will describe more closely, directly mirrors the general state of power relations in a late capitalist, neo-liberal setting.

Since its very beginnings in the eighteenth century, the modern museum played a key role in forming the social order. For along with the state itself, the museum was very much a national project. The British Museum was a groundbreaking example from its opening in 1759. Its mission was to create the narrative of a representative national history and heritage. In accordance with this aim, its ideal audience was socialized into the role of model citizen: patriotic, conscious and proud of a rich history, superior to other nations. Accordingly, the museum's initial task was to bolster "the authoritarian legitimation of the nation state […] through the construction of a history, a patrimony […] and a canon."[1]

In neo-capitalist societies of today, art institutions are becoming branded spaces. The private-sector stakeholders are less interested in attending the museum they ostensibly support than in using it as a tool for image production and, ultimately, to boost the profitability of their company. In such an environment, the ideal audience is a mass of anonymous consumers. This corporate model of an art institution—under which we can include all the major museums including the Guggenheim, the Tate and the MoMA as well as more and more midsized *kunsthallen* and even smaller institutions—has a peer group of speculators, who potentially feel more connected with the brand than to the programming. An unspecified audience is rated in terms of numbers alone.

The question of what an art institution itself, as opposed to its stakeholders, actually wants from the visiting public is, of course, entirely separate from the economic pressures forced upon all such institutions, which produces the resulting populist idea of

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[1] Hito Steyerl, "The Institution of Critique,"
 http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0106/steyerl/en

an audience. From the mid- or late 1990s onwards, critical and progressive institutions have been reacting to such developments. These initiatives were labeled "New Institutionalism", and they were recognized in a curatorial intention to create "an active space" that is "part community center, part laboratory and part academy", these attributes I am quoting from the website of Rooseum in Malmö, which—under the directorship of Charles Esche and later Lene Crone Jensen—was one of the model institutions of this new experimental and multi-functional approach to curating.

What Rooseum and other progressive art institutions had in common was that they were institutions of critique, which means institutions that have internalized the institutional critique that was formulated by artists in the 1970s and 1990s and developed an auto-critique that is put forward by curators in the first place. Curators no longer just invited noted artists, but were themselves changing institutional structures, their hierarchies, and functions.

As such, they employed a criticism of globalized corporate institutionalism and its consumer audience. Instead, they insisted that new publics need to be "produced," which was a counter-thesis to the old familiar concept of "reaching out to audiences."

These efforts were rooted in a radically different understanding of the public sphere and its structure. It was regarded as a democratic space shaped by diversity, in which different interests existing in parallel have a conflictual mutual relationship. This notion is in harsh contrast to the populist idea shared by many politicians, of a homogeneous public space that excludes conflict. But with the concurrent trend towards privatization, security, rivalry and exclusion in public spaces, the Habermasian notion of a homogeneous democratic space—in which even the most diverse interests can be lived and acted out harmoniously alongside one another—is unimaginable. The recognition of dissonance as a productive force of public spaces is a major challenge currently facing public art institutions, along with all other public institu-

tions and users of public spaces, and touches on urban planning, politics, the media and many other fields. It involves dealing with diversity, and in line with Chantal Mouffe's notion of an agonistic public sphere, making existing conflicts productive. These considerations are reflected in multi-functional programming for diverse audiences that are not normally thought of in the context of art institutions, for example different migrant groups. This approach also involves curatorial work that is open to participatory approaches and an institutional profile that embraces ruptures and unforseeable changes.[2]

Within a very short space of time these approaches, although successful in terms of opening up such museums to new local publics and gaining international recognition in the art world, had been put in their place like insubordinate teenagers, and things changed dramatically.

Let me give you a few more examples. In 2004, during my time as a curator for NIFCA, the Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art, I worked with the Swedish artists Mike Bode and Staffan Schmidt on the project Spaces of Conflict, described as an "audio-visual, research-based essay on institutional spaces." The project was based on close co-operation and frequent exchanges with curators and directors of seven institutions in Berlin, Oslo, Copenhagen, Vilnius, Malmö and Helsinki, along with students from the art academies in these cities. It is remarkable that almost all the institutions portrayed by Bode and Schmidt—the Rooseum, Kunst-Werke Berlin, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Oslo (now the National Museum for Contemporary Art, Architecture and Design), Taidehalli in Helsinki, the x-room in Copenhagen and NIFCA itself—are now undergoing a period of profound change that demands a radical shift of political direction, ranging from complete restructuring via serious decisions about curatorial and directorial positions to even the closure of

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[2] See Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (London: Routledge, 2005).

the institution, which unfortunately applies to NIFCA itself.[3] Most of the institutions seem to have been cut down to size, whether they were progressive experiments that included the structures of the institutions in their programmatic approach, special-interest museums for contemporary art or simply niche-like locations of the contemporary within institutions working on an historical basis.

The tendency is clear: visitor numbers and a populist image-production are the measures of success and centralized superstructures are encouraged. Tone Hansen, an artist and researcher from Oslo, uses the term "megamonstermuseum" in her study of the centralization process of the state museums in Oslo.[4]

What is not wanted is criticality. Criticality did not survive the "corporate turn" in the institutional landscape. This is not only due to those larger institutions that are run like branded global companies in an obvious way, like the Guggenheim— which provides the clearest example of how an institution is conceived and staged by politicians and sponsors—but also more and more to mid-sized and smaller ones such as the German *Kunstvereine* or art associations, which are supposed to be experimental but find themselves increasingly forced into curating programs similar to an established *Kunsthalle*. Furthermore, the recent resignations of museum directors from Oslo to Düsseldorf to Cincinnati show a clear trend in which directors refuse to abandon their curatorial profile under the pressure of the dictates of profit, populism in pursuing bigger and bigger audiences and managerialism, which aims to introduce private-sector management methods into the public sector including the museum world.

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[3] *Editor's note:* In 2006 Rooseum closed and remained so until 2009, when it became a branch of Moderna Museet in Stockholm, the national museum for modern and contemporary art.

[4] Tone Hansen works as research fellow on this subject at the Academy of Fine Arts in Oslo.

In consideration of the foregoing, the following questions are vital. Is anything left of an institution of critique, and what does it mean in the present context? Can discussion of the conditions of production be carried out within the institutions themselves, and what are the consequences for their internal structures, functionality, programming and projections? Or, to quote Hito Steyerl: "Is it not rather absurd to argue that something like an institution of critique exists, at a time when critical cultural institutions are clearly being dismantled, underfunded, and subjected to the demands of a neoliberal event economy?"[5]

In this current scenario, which goes hand in hand with the dismantling of the welfare state, a new orientation for emancipatory forms of action in the institutionalized art field appears to be needed. This brings us back to a fundamental question: What do we actually expect from an art institution? What do we want an institution to stand for? What does an arts-based institution produce in the way of public desire and demand?

In his essay for the publication "Art and its Institutions," which I edited for NIFCA, Sven-Olov Wallenstein analyzed "institutional desires" that are connected with art institutions, and reveals a profound paradox by asking: "Why is there such a desire for institutions and why does the very attempt to meet it only give rise to more dissatisfaction?" Referring to Guattari, he concludes that "the need for facilities is an illusion, or rather a retroactive *rationalization*." Instead it is the very institution which, as he continues, "produces a certain structure of desire, it enables a certain space where signifiers and desires can circulate, and in this sense it is just as futile to dream of a fully de-institutionalized space as it is to dream of an institution that would work."[6] While on the one hand you can't beat this argument, on the other the conclusion cannot

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[5] Hito Steyerl, ibid.
[6] Sven-Olov Wallenstein, "Instituional Desires," in: Nina Möntmann (ed.), *Art and Its Institutions*, London (Black Dog Publishing) 2006, 114–123, cit. p. 121.

be, as Wallenstein also says, to leave institutions completely aside in order to enter alternative spheres.

Evidently, changes still must be initiated from within an institution. The main question is, who can be the peer group for a new transgressive art institution? Along with this, how can an art institution draw in diverse public groups and thereby create an active agency within the public sphere that is societally powerful enough to defend a new institutional model?

In this context, the model of a "relational institution" is attracting the interest of some curators. It implies that the institution is redefining itself through its relations to various public groups. What is different from the aspirations of "New Institutionalism" is that it is operating more behind the scenes. Instead of generally opening up the building or endlessly adding new and different events via curatorial innovation, they are more interested in practicing, in effect, a certain withdrawal that enables the institution to develop a targeted approach to specific groups, to find allies for interventions in the public realm and to establish more continual relations with specific publics that sympathize with their approach.

The MACBA in Barcelona, a museum that often claims to be a mainspring in these efforts, has developed in recent years "several projects that have sought to propose new ways in which art can exist in the public sphere." In 2005 and 2006 they held a conference in two parts with the title "Another Relationality. Rethinking Art as Experience." In the outline MACBA also clearly defined their own position on the subject: "Relationality is a concept that enables us to intervene controversially in the debate on art institutions and their audiences…. From the standpoint of the museum, we understand the relational as a space for art that temporarily suspends institutional autonomy and explores new forms of interaction with the social…. We seek ways in which art can make a meaningful contribution, through its specific nature, to multiplying public spheres. And this process can be defined in terms of relations between different subjects, different forms, different spaces."

At the same time the *Bildmuseet* in Umeå, in collaboration with the artist Apolonija Šušteršic, who then also was a professor at the Royal Academy in Stockholm, started a longterm project with the title "The Relational Museum," which includes workshops, seminars, public meetings, publications, site-specific art projects or other activities and events. The aim is "to explore the relations between the museum of contemporary art and its contexts/audiences/publics." They are asking themselves: "What kinds of social, public and civic spaces does/may the contemporary art institution generate and produce? What are the social/political situations engendered? Which encounters are made possible? In this project, Bildmuseet itself, as an imaginary and real entity, would be the particular case study."

Both MACBA and Bildmuseet are actively questioning their own position in the public realm and trying to consciously create diverse public spheres. They are asking questions fundamental to the future of the museum as a public institution within an ever more privatized public realm, such as how to preserve the institution's autonomy while simultaneously generating diverse publics in order to maximize its political potential.

But how can they offer alternatives to the dependent art institution that is constantly busy developing new strategies for fundraising, that is understaffed and overworked and that has to adopt the mechanisms of the free market economy without reaping benefits from it—having to manage a major modern institution on a pittance?

Alongside the relational experiences, what is also needed is to establish transgressive institutional structures that orient themselves towards other disciplines and matters apart from corporate management within globalized capitalism. This means we have to imagine institutional practice as being closer to research-based or artistic practice than to business strategies, which can be achieved through participatory efforts that are not only part of the programming but are implemented within the decision-making machinery of an institution, in its hardware.

In search of participatory institution-forming activities, my attention has recently turned to the institutional situation in several regions in the southern hemisphere, where the few official contemporary art institutions remain mostly inaccessible for young artists. They have also become dysfunctional parts of the public sphere, where artists and curators lack ready access to either public or private funding. In such local situations, inadequate access to institutional infrastructure often gives rise to community projects that are characterized by their institution-forming character. You often find collective and occasionally interdisciplinary activities being undertaken by artists, sometimes together with curators, researchers, activists or new media workers. They start with a small space and very local programming, exhibiting their own work and that of artists they know or using the space for other community activities such as discussions or parties. In the beginning this is therefore a kind of community center or hangout for friends from the art field. In the regions I am talking about these activities are assuming a quasi-institutional status that often goes hand in hand with an expansion of their activity. They then start to fundraise internationally, set up residencies, offer research possibilities, invite foreign curators and artists, organize film programs, edit magazines and so on.

I am thinking of groups like Sarai in Delhi, with over thirty theorists, artists, programmers and activists who work primarily with new media, or the artists' collectives known as ruangrupa in Jakarta. Sarai regularly organize local and international conferences and film screenings on these issues, and their research and publications draw on the broad network they have established through mailing lists, blogs and meetings, while ruangrupa ("culture groups") aim to support the development of the local art scene by carrying out research and documentation, inviting curators and artists for exhibitions, offering residencies, publishing the half-yearly magazine *Karbon* and organizing the twice-yearly 'OK' video festival. Although both are non-profit organizations, Sarai

and ruangrupa are organized along institutional lines (ruangrupa is funded by the Dutch foundations Hivos, RAIN and Doen Stichting, while Sarai was affiliated from the outset to the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies in Delhi). What most clearly distinguishes them from official institutions is the way they have developed organically out of a growing local grouping, together with the resulting, self-determined working models, which do not rely on visitor numbers or the opinions of sponsors, politicians or the press.

The reason why I am referring to these initiatives is that they offer a model for a self-organized continuous locally and internationally operating organization or quasi-institution, in an environment where—for good or ill—there are almost no functioning art institutions, and as a result no official standards for institutions. The Brazilian political scientist Leonardo Avritzer, who has analyzed the influence of participatory publics and collective action in current processes of democratization in Latin America, has written: "Institutionalization in such a condition has to assume a different meaning, namely the connection between new collective forms of occupation of the public space with new institutional designs."[7] Applied to the art field, and considering art institutions as part of the public space, developing "collective forms of occupation of the public space" can be a valuable means for art institutions to reinforce participatory and independent working processes with artists and actors from other fields.

Still, the problem persists of how to maintain these independent structures even while entering the sphere of official power structures. Freedom of decisions and actions only unfolds as a potential within an opaque space. This thesis is proved by the fact that the above mentioned and similar organizations increasingly face problems of censorship and/or withdrawal of funding the more well known, and potentially powerful, they get.

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[7] Leonardo Avritzer, *Democracy and the Public Space in Latin America* (Princeton: 2002), p. 165.

Hence the question is how to maintain independent structures while participating in an "official" institutional landscape and its power structures.

In the Western Hemisphere there are few if any non-institutionalized spheres in which one could experiment with independent participatory organizations. There are categories and standards for all kinds of alternative spaces. Therefore, in my opinion what institutions in Western countries need to do, as a first step toward founding independent organizations, is precisely to reduce the number of structures and standards, and disengage spaces from an excess of codes and contexts. Here, where we have an institutionalized art field—and consequently the possibility to participate in semi-public spaces, but also the difficulties caused by the control mechanisms of these spaces—the options are somewhat different. Here there are inherently many categories and conventions for all kinds of art spaces, and alternatives are always measured against the official system that already exists, and is increasingly defined by the politics of city marketing and sponsorship. It may seem paradoxical, but viewed from this perspective, we in fact have less scope and more control. Therefore, a conceivable new and transgressive institution would be one that maintains and expands its participation in (semi-) public space, and at the same time creates free un-branded spaces while minimizing dependencies.

Such a development could help counter the corporate emphasis that globalization and neo-capitalism brought about, enabling instead an active and immediate global exchange of diverse public groups and individual voices and along with it a broader critique of the nation-state. It must widen its scope, consider cross-genre collaborations with established as well as alternative organizations, and initiate multi-disciplinary activities. This conceivable critical institution could, for example, take the form of an internationally operative "organized network," aimed at strengthening diverse smaller, independent institutions and activities—be they alternative, artist-run, or research-based—

and which could also set up temporary platforms within bigger institutions. Ned Rossiter describes the potential of "organized networks" to supercede modern institutions that are just "rebooted into the digital age" by "reconciling their hierarchical structures of organization with the flexible, partially decentralized and transnational flows of culture, finance and labor." The advantage of such organized networks lies, rather, in their functioning as "social-technical forms that co-emerge with the development of digital information and communication technologies."[8] In the art field this new institution of organized collaborations could serve then as an information pool, a hub for various transdisciplinary forms of collaborations, in legal matters as a union and as an entry for audiences to participate locally and exchange internationally.

The transformative public potential of such a structured institution lies in creating "diasporic public spheres," as they are described by Arjun Appadurai.[9] It would be a way to both internationalize and democratize the art institution and its research facilities. This, in turn, could help break down or at least question certain dominant forms of institutional politics while opening up a "new role for the imagination in social life."[10] And on the level of funding, groundbreaking for new private as well as public foundations is needed to create self-sustainable, independent and powerful alternatives.

[8] Ned Rossiter, Can Organized Networks Make Money for Designers? (http://summit.kein.org/node/309). See also Ned Rossiter, *Organized Networks. Media Theory, Creative Labour, New Institutions* (Rotterdam 2006).

[9] Arjun Appadurai, "Grassroots Globalization and the Research Imagination," in, *Globalization*, Arjun Appadurai (ed.), (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2001), p. 4.

[10] Appadurai 2001, p. 4.

# Graffiti in the Public Realms

Jacob Kimvall

Graffiti in the public realms are commonly described as destruction of public and/or private property, and offensive to public taste. But does this dictum also apply to the removal of the same graffiti? Could this not be regarded as iconoclasm—that is, an ideological destruction of a visual image? And does it matter if the graffiti is done with a "good purpose?" The discourse regarding the closely related phenomena of street art—commonly described as creative, amusing and beautiful—points in that direction. And further, who is the *we-subject* that is abused or amused by graffiti or street art?

As a graffiti writer since the late 1980s and, subsequently, as an art critic specialized in graffiti, I have personally had reason to ask myself these and similar questions. This chapter can be seen as an attempt to bring to the fore some of my own observations and conclusions. Many of the examples are taken from my personal experiences as graffitist and critic, while the discussion is based largely on the results from my written thesis in art history.

*"Graffiti means destruction of private and public property."* This quote—taken from an anti-graffiti poster—represents a view of graffiti that dominates mainstream media discourse, at least in the Scandinavian and the Anglo-American cultural spheres. Though this perspective needs to be considered, my paper will take the opposite view as a point of departure. That is: graffiti removal means destruction of private and public art. I also argue that graffiti is not removed randomly or unconscious-

ly but systematically and quite consciously. The act of removal has both political and cognitive implications. "Removal" should here be understood in the very broadest sense of the word.

In turn, "graffiti" itself refers to a wide range of phenomena. Here are two different definitions that often tend to blend into each other, and produce confusion as a result.

The first definition stems from archeological research at Pompeii and is described in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* as: "Unauthorized writing or drawing on a surface in a public place." The definition refers to a certain kind of act in a certain situation: the illegal or at least unauthorized application of a message in the public sphere. This is a practice that can be found more or less all over the world and in many historical societies as well.

Figure 1 shows a piece of literally ancient graffiti. The little cartoon-like character was scratched into one of the paintings in Villa dei Misteri. And unlike the rest of the painting this certain part was protected from arrogant and clumsy visitors by a glass-shield, claiming that this particular ancient graffiti is in need of higher protection (and therefore of higher value) than the artifact it is inscribed on.

Figure 2 shows an example of more contemporary graffiti, done in the late 1990s. Someone seized the opportunity to write slightly obscene and mildly sarcastic messages about the upcoming year on a street advertisement for calendars—asides like "Put my own farts on fire" and "Rob the Swedish Central Bank."

Both of these examples are graffiti in the dictionary's definition. However, this definition misses some important aspects of how the word *graffiti* is used. The second definition of graffiti would describe it as a certain kind of visual art movement or a limited group of image conventions. This graffiti grew out of neighborhoods like Washington Heights and South Bronx in New York City during the 1960s and 1970s and subsequently received worldwide recognition in the early 1980s as a part of the hip-hop subculture. In this sense of the word, graffiti forms a rich artistic tradition with different schools and styles.

Thus to understand graffiti, it is crucial to make a distinction between two meanings of the word:

> *Graffiti as a certain kind of act* (but not necessarily in a specific visual convention); and *Graffiti as certain kind of image* (but not necessarily a specific act nor in a public place)

In the following I will refer to these two different meanings as *graffiti as act* and *graffiti art.*

It is also important to keep in mind that the two definitions do not exclude each other. A lot of graffiti art is made illicitly on surfaces in public places and is graffiti in both senses of the word. But it is also possible to do graffiti art in an "authorized" way, whether in a public place, with permission from the real-estate owner, in sketchbooks or on canvas.

Graffiti removal as destruction of private and public art
—as iconoclasm

In this context, iconoclasm is understood as the ideological destruction of images. As a theoretical point of departure I have used David Freedberg's book *The Power of Images*. Freedberg argues that iconoclasm is not a certain historical phenomena within the Byzantine church but rather a central part of Western thinking about images stemming from the Old Testament as well as Plato. It also results both in constant iconoclasm at the individual level and in outbreaks of organized group iconoclasm. The latter have occurred throughout Western history, with the Nazi regime's *Entartete Kunst* as the best known twentieth century example.
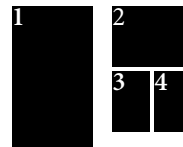
1. Figure 1: Graffiti in Villa dei Misteri, Pompeii.
2. Figure 2: Graffiti on Swedish advertisement, late 1990s.
3. Figure 3: Graffiti on the lower base of the statue of King Gustav III.
4. Figure 4: Graffiti of a face with eyes painted over.
   *Photos 1–4 by Jacob Kimvall.*

Fuck the Buff by Seen, 1980.

5. Figure 5: "Fuck the Buff" by Seen (1980)
*Photo: Henry Chalfant.*

Published with the kind permission of the photographer.

6–8. Figure 6, 7 & 8: "Sky's the Limit" by Bil Blast (1982)
*Photos: Henry Chalfant.*
Published with the kind permission of the photographer.
9. Figure 9: "Fascinate" by Circle & Tariq (1989)
*Photo: Jacob Kimvall (2007)*

10. Figure 10: "Bromma Hall of Fame"
*Photo: Sasha Mata, (April 2005).*
Published with the kind permission of the photographer.
11. Figure 11: "Bromma Hall of Fame"
*Photo: Jacob Kimvall*

12. Figure 12: "Traffic Island". (2004)
13. Figure 13: "Why can't some people respect art?". (2005)
*Photos: Akay & Peter Barinowski.*
Taken from the book "Urban Recreation", Dokument förlag (2006).
Published with the kind permission of the photographer.

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14. Figure 14: Work by French artist Zevs in Wuppertal, Germany.
*Photo: Torkel Sjöstrand (2006).*
Published with the kind permission of the photographer.
15. Figure 15: Photogragh from the opening of German graffiti artist
Brom's exhibition in Wuppertal, Germany.

16. Figure 16: "Ground Zero. United we stand, divided we fall (Part 2)" (2001).
*Photo: Jacob Kimvall (2007)*

One of Freedberg's central claims is that although (especially individual) iconoclasm is often described as random irrational and emotional acts, rational analysis of iconoclasm can yield specific answers: "All the apparently random, idiosyncratic, and spontaneous cases show signs of an inner logic we can grasp; all show elements that feature in the outbreaks of group iconoclasm."[1] In this sense iconoclasm is also closely connected to questions of power as well as both symbolic and real violence. For example, one can find iconoclastic aspects in the attack on the Twin Towers in New York, 11 September, 2001.

Figure 3 shows a statue of the Swedish King Gustav III where someone has sprayed the text "NO KINGS NO MASTERS!" on its lower base. The purpose is quite obvious. It is a political act pointed towards and against the monarchy. But regarded as iconoclasm, it is not very effective. It is as if this antiroyalist iconoclast is respectfully kneeling in front of the king and that his or her act is actually confirming and acknowledging royal power without challenging it at all. One could easily imagine how much more violent and brutal it would have been if the person had scribbled on the plinth (the upper base), not to mention on the statue itself.

As David Freedberg points out, iconoclasts tend to attack the eyes of the image. He claims that this is because the eyes represent "the clearest and most obvious indications of the vitality of the represented figure." Although Freedberg's examples mainly draw from fine arts and religious imagery, a multitude of examples could be found in graffiti. Figure 4 shows a photo of a face, drawn on the wall in the basement of a tenement building. Someone else subsequently painted over the eyes.

Most graffiti is destroyed or erased soon after it's done. It is often painted over or blasted away by the property owner, or in different anti-graffiti programs. The systematical removal of graffiti is called buffing. Figure 5 shows a graffiti piece on a New

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[1] David Freedberg, The Power of Images, (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1989) p. 418.

York subway car done in 1980 by Seen. It is easy to read: "Fuck the Buff." The photo is published in the book *Subway art*, in a short chapter explaining the concept of buffing. A funny thing with this photo, and which actually goes unremarked, is that the piece is partly destroyed. The letters F, U and K are partly smeared out, or maybe painted over in order to censor the curse-word. So one should maybe rather call it "**c* the Buff" in line with how the record industry censors song titles that include profane language.

While Seen's painting is graffiti in both senses of the word, the piece "Sky's the limit" from 1982 (Figure 6) by Bil Blast was done with permission in a park in uptown Manhattan and is therefore graffiti only in the latter sense of the word, as graffiti art. "Sky's the limit" gained worldwide recognition through Malcolm McLaren's video "Buffalo Gals" and remained un-touched for more than two years until somebody started scrib-bling in the background and someone else later did a whole piece over the lower part. This is graffiti in both senses of the word (Figure 7).

When a piece gets to be a couple of years old, it is not of cur-rent interest anymore and frequently gets painted over by other graffitists with new work. This normally does not give offense, but Bil Blast became upset and he struck back by painting the message "Why can't some people respect art?" over the new graffiti (Figure 8).

The work "Fascinate" was done with permission in Spånga outside Stockholm, in the summer of 1989 by Circle and Tariq. In 2012, the painting actually still exists, although in 2007 it underwent a transformation (Figure 9). The lower part is gone, due to the fact that the building was being restored. But it has clearly also been attacked by iconoclasts. First Nazis (or at least Nazi-sympathizers) drew swastikas in the piece then anti-Nazi activists defaced the swastikas. Someone has also painted blue over the eyes of one of the characters. But if any graffiti writer were to go over this piece today, the act would be considered by

other graffitists as extremely disrespectful, and not only to Circle and Tariq but to the graffiti art tradition.

If done on wall where everyone and anyone are permitted to paint, graffiti pieces are usually painted over by other graffiti writers, sometimes within hours. Figure 10 shows an example of a piece on such a wall. This place, called "Bromma hall of fame," was actually of dubious legality, while still closer to being "not legal" than actually illegal. However, when some local politicians found out about the place they decided to buff it and also to put up signs explaining that writing graffiti was illegal. Figure 11 is a photo of the same section as the previous pictures after the whitewashing. The other side of the wall—which had not been used as a hall of fame, but more as a place for rehearsing, practicing and testing of the paint—was not whitewashed.

The wall barely stands up and is remotely located at the far end of an industrial area. It's on an empty lot waiting to be rebuilt. Spending tax money on painting these walls white seems quite absurd, but it was motivated by the responsible official who was being pressured by a local crime prevention organization that had been protesting against use of the walls for graffiti purposes. According to this group, graffiti artists were drug addicts and anti-social types who made the area look ugly, while the graffiti made it look like a slum. When asked what would happen if graffitists should continue to paint there the representative explained that the ultimate step would be to tear the walls down so that nobody could paint on them; the city could not afford to paint them white over and over again.[2]

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[2] In Stockholm, anti graffiti policies are now so strict that it is even common for the removal of old graffiti, done with permission. When it was proposed that "Fascinate" should be declared cultural landmark, Kristina Alvendal, who was Stockholm's Deputy Mayor at the time, responsible for City Planning and Sports Division said: "Graffiti creates an unsafe housing environment and the painting [Fascinate] will attract additional graffiti. I think it would be very misguided to keep the wall […] If the painting remains on the site, it will create an unsafe environment." Authors translation from: Natalie Roos Holmborg "Politiker går emot skydd av graffiti", *Dagens Nyheter* 2008-11-05.

Obviously the action to paint the wall white was not taken out of any kind of concern for the structure. It was done purely to get rid of the painted images and what these were seen to represent, which makes the action a textbook example of iconoclasm. The close connection to the artists' social behavior is also typical of iconoclasm: in his discussion on *Entartete kunst* Freedberg concludes that there is an old assumption that "pure art can only be produced by pure artists […] work of degenerate artists, even if their art conforms, must go."[3]

"Fascinate" was made almost twenty years ago. It would most likely be impossible to get permits to do a painting like it in Stockholm today due to political considerations. Since the early 1990s an anti-graffiti-art movement has mushroomed internationally. And in mainstream media discourse, graffiti has increasingly been regarded strictly as a problem, connected to a diverse range of social concerns. This brings us back to the "blurring" of the two different meanings of graffiti I introduced earlier in the text. One may conclude that it is not how graffiti looks that matters—it is always ugly; nor does it matter if it's conducted on a legal wall since graffiti is always illegal.

Roughly at the same time as graffiti was turned into a problem in media discourse, a kind of post-medial graffiti movement broke loose from the graffiti art tradition. One could call it *graffiti art in the expanded field*; also known as street art. Many (though far from all) of the street artists are graffiti artists or former graffiti artists, the British artist Banksy or Akay from Sweden are two well known examples. Unlike graffiti art, street art is not a stylistic tradition, but more like a set of artistic strategies. Although street art is graffiti in the sense that it is the unauthorized application of a message in a public place, it has not become nearly as controversial as graffiti art. Between 2006 and 2008 the largest Swedish Morning newspaper presented a piece of street art each week. An example of weekly graffiti art, however, would be inconceivable in any mainstream media elsewhere. So while graffiti seems to have

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[3] Freedberg p. 388.

become consigned to the "They" pool, street art seems to have become "We." While by this logic graffiti is ugly, depressing, unsophisticated, and promotes criminal behavior, street art became the opposite: beautiful, funny, ingenious and smart. And while it is not technically legal, you couldn't really say it is criminal, could you? Well, at least it is not anti-social.

Usually street art contains more publicly open messages than graffiti tags and pieces, but a lot of street artists still refer overtly to the graffiti tradition. One of the most famous works in Swedish street art is Akay's and Peter Baranowski's "Traffic Island" (Figure 12). The little cottage built on cliff in the middle of a highway has been acknowledged and appreciated by the institutional art world as well as other sectors of society. But few of those who know about this work are aware that the area has been Akay's main venue for his graffiti art for almost twenty years and that he made graffiti pieces there even before the highway was built.[4]

Another of Akay's and Peter Baranowski's projects was "Graffiti is not a Crime," in which they have painted huge messages in the snow around Stockholm—and documented them from above. All of these messages refer to different classical or canonized graffiti pieces like "Fuck the Buff," "Sky's the Limit" and "Why can't some people respect art?" (Figure 13).

A very ambitious (post-medial) graffiti art/street art project took place in 2006 in the city of Wuppertal in Germany, sponsored by one of the world's largest sport-drink corporations. Some twenty artists from all over the world were invited to participate (including Akay—who however declined to participate). The artists were granted total artistic and social freedom to do what they wanted. A contract was drawn up whereby the sponsor would pay for everything—including possible bails, fines or claimed damages.

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[4] *Editor's note:* In the end, Traffic Island suffered from a form of iconoclasm, as new road constructions led to the demolition of the very cliff the cottage was built on.

The available documentation indicates that the artists worked without any interaction either with local authorities or with local graffiti writers. One rumor has it that they even painted over some of the local graffiti writer's pieces and that one of these graffitists had passed away. Still, some of the projects were artistically successful and conceptually intriguing. Figure 14 shows the work by the French artist Zevs. He went around Wuppertal doing tags by scrubbing away dirt. He called his project "Graffiti Clean City" and in that way was playing on assumptions that graffiti is inherently dirty and anti-social.

Brom from Berlin used the resources to sublet a gallery where he showed his canvases. Figure 15 is from the opening of the gallery show. Given the conditions this is perhaps the most sympathetic and honest work. To have a gallery exhibition and invite people to come is to create a place where a more equal meeting could appear.

In conclusion I would like to return to the issue of Us and Them. During Mayor Rudy Giuliani's term in office in the 1990s the graffiti culture in New York was much under fire, seen as anti-social and lumped in with various types of criminal behavior. In the (in) famous so-called *broken window theory* graffiti was one of the chief causes of an unsafe urban environment, that is something making Us (ordinary citizens) *feel* unsafe. Interestingly, it seems that the antagonistic relationship has been re-evaluated since 9/11. The graffitists with a contrasting external enemy have become, if not *Us* then at least *not Them* anymore. In this new light, graffiti could almost be seen as an old New York virtue. Nowadays in all the five boroughs you can find patriotic memorial graffiti.

The Incredible Hulk, walking out of the ruins of the World Trade Center carrying the Star-Spangled Banner, in Figure 16, constitutes the centerpiece of a huge graffiti mural in Queensbridge, New York. The work is called "Ground Zero. United we stand divided we fall (Part 2)." The Us-subject here obviously

includes all New Yorkers or even maybe all citizens of the USA— and of course including the graffitists.

The piece was made in the late autumn of 2001; I took the photo in April 2007, and the piece is completely untouched. But I would like you, the reader, to dwell one moment on how it would have been interpreted had this piece been erased in one of the city's anti-graffiti programs or painted over. I think it would be interpreted as an attack of the victims of 9/11, while city removal would be considered impossible.

So as a graffiti writer contributing to a volume called "Placing Art in the Public Realm," I would like to advocate awareness of the two issues—or maybe rather two phenomena—that I have tried to point out. First, that graffiti removal in the public realm has ideological and political as well as cognitive implications and motives. And second, as a result of this, the identification of who and what a certain act or work of graffiti represents is of crucial importance—as is any form of visual object in the public realms.

This contribution was originally presented with a three-minute excerpt of the short film "The Subconscious Art of Graffiti Removal" by Matt McCormick (with the artist Miranda July as narrator) was shown. A longer excerpt can be found on the DVD "Metagraffiti" (Dokument Press, 2009) or downloaded from McCormick's website: *http://www.rodeofilmco.com/2008/the-subconscious-art-of-graffiti-removal/*

# Ontologizing the Public Realm
# – Arendt and the Political

Cecilia Sjöholm

Within the tradition of German philosophy, the idea of a public realm has incarnated the possibilities of emancipation and enlightenment. To Immanuel Kant, the public sphere opened up in the eighteenth century represents a victory of reason over private interests. To Jürgen Habermas, the debates that are undertaken within the public sphere represent a promise of democracy. In this latter interpretation, the possibilities for communication are conditioned by the public realm, and the possibilities of democracy are conditioned by the communication taking place in the public realm; the goal of democracy is to make it possible, for as many people as possible, to participate in public debates. To Habermas as for Kant, the public sphere represents the possibilities of emancipation; we participate in open discussion and debate with a kind of unaffected enthusiasm where we are able to transcend our private interests, thereby participating in the realm of freedom opened up by the modern discovery of normativity.

In a similar way, Hannah Arendt idealised the *polis* of ancient Greece as a retrospective vision of political freedom. But to Arendt, the political impact of the public realm is less about the trajectory of modernity, the realization of reason or normative language. It is, rather, an ontologized vision of how our concepts of reality and truth arise. Rather than defining human reality as a product of The Human, Arendt's describes it as the product of

plurality. Through the gathering of perspectives which are realized in and through public realm, in its historical versions as given in the *polis*, the *res publica* and so on, what Arendt calls reality comes into being. Unless we perceive things in and through the perspectives of others, objects are not real; they remain in the shadowy realm of the unreal. Thus, rather than essentializing humans through their history or their activities, Arendt defines plurality as that which is human, and thereby also humans in the plural, and thereby also impossible to essentialize. The public realm, as she calls it, is therefore one that creates the kind of reality that is a product of human activity, and thereby of human life.

Our perception of reality does not arise through inner reflection. It arises through the dialectics between the self and the plurality that we call the public realm. In this way, judgment and our thought will always be dependent on what we call the public realm. It is the expectation of communicating with others that makes us perceive a common reality.

Arendt makes it clear that every idea of humanity as one form, or essence, goes against that which marks human life: that which conditions human life is not "human nature." There is no way to summarize "the human" according to the sum of her biology or history. Human life is marked by a capacity to act. Action is a capacity which is made possible only through plurality—and thereby the multiplicity of perspectives, histories, and biographies. It is this plurality that coincides with the concept of the public realm, which to Arendt has an ontological status, transcending the difference between ancient and modern. The public realm, and the reality created through it, disessentializes the concept of human life in the philosophy of Arendt. In discussing the horrific reality of the concentration camps, and the seeming dehumanization of the twentieth century, she writes: "… man's 'nature' is only 'hu-

man' insofar as it opens up man to the possibility of becoming something highly unnatural, that is, a man."[1]

Such a possibility is given in the public realm, where humans are defined through their actions, through their histories, and where their world is defined through its historicity. The public realm is a realm of plurality, but it corresponds to that which singularizes human beings through a history and particularity which can only be realised in the public sphere.

> It is indeed as though everything that is alive—in addition to the fact that its surface is made for appearance, fit to be seen and meant to appear to others—has an *urge to appear*, to fit itself into the world of appearances by displaying and showing, not its "inner self" but itself as an individual.[2]

This quote is crucial since it connotes a process of individuation, of coming into being, where the appearance of that which is singular, particular or individual is secondary to the plurality into which it fits. In other words, plurality is the category through which the world comes into being for Arendt—a condition for the creation of singularities, whether we talk about the making of things or objects, or about the appearance of human individuals. Plurality as such may be constituted by humans, but it can never be defined as essentially human; plurality is rather the spacing, the in-between, or the differentiation which creates the individuation of human beings as well as of objects.

In his well known text "Who is the subject of the rights of man?" Jacques Rancière denounces what he calls the "archipolitical" position of Hannah Arendt. In ontologizing the question of the political, through equating the political subject with the subject that is present in the public realm, Arendt, in Rancière's view, misses the point about democracy. Democracy, in Ran-

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[1] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harvest, 1979), p. 455.
[2] Hannah Arendt, *Life of the Mind I* (London, Secker & Warburg, 1978), p. 23.

cière's version, is not a question of freedom in the abstract, but rather of subjectivation. Democracy lives through the kind of dissensus that creates subjectivation, or through the kind of antagonisms that will leave those realms open through which rights can be claimed. In other words, democracy is defined through the processes through which new political subjects come to be, rather than through the stature of the dignified political animal of *the polis*, whom Hannah Arendt herself counts as a perpetual possibility of modernity. In ontologizing the radical difference between public and private, and in refusing the relevance of the social for the political, Rancière argues, Arendt constructs her public realm in the vein of consensus rather than dissensus. To Rancière, politics is not a sphere but a process. As his example, he takes the discussion of "The perplexities of the rights of man" in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, where Arendt deplores the emergence of the rightless beyond the boundaries of the city state. Arendt's logic is a vicious circle:

> … the identification of the subject of the rights of Man with the subject deprived of any rights is not only the vicious circle of a theory; it is also the result of an effect of the reconfiguration of the political field, of an actual process of depoliticization. This process is what is known by the name of *consensus.* / … (it means that we resort to identity politics and identification of interests etc…)" *Consensus* means closing the realm of dissensus by plugging the intervals and patching over the possible gaps between appearance and reality or law and fact … *Consensus* is the reduction of democracy to the way of life of a society, to its *ethos*—meaning by this word both the abode of a group and its lifestyle.[3]

Rancière's redefinition of the political as process of dissensus rather than as the ongoing affairs of public realm is seconded by Chantal Mouffe, who shares the misgivings of Rancière by accusing Arendt of creating a notion of the public realm that is erected

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[3] Jacques Rancière, "Who is the Subject of the Rights of Man?" South Atlantic Quarterly 103 (2/3 (2004), pp. 297–310, 306.

on a concept of dissensus. The quest of Ranciére as well as of Mouffe is, in other words, the de-ontologization of politics. Such de-ontologization must start with the human. The idea of the state of exception as presented by Giorgio Agamben in *Homo Sacer*, as well as the idea of the rights of man in Hannah Arendt, rests on an ontological understanding of the human animal, Rancière argues. But we must instead deontologize the human in order to think another political subject, who is also the subject of the rights of man.

However, as we have seen, Arendt's conception of public realm has little to do with political influences, or with the construction of political identities. Such an endeavor, I am sure, Arendt would relegate to the social sphere, a sphere which is wholly subdued to the possibility of essentializing human life— for instance in the form of the man, the woman or the worker. What the political realm of the public sphere does, rather, is to create the possibility of a reality which exceeds, precisely, that which can be identified as human life in a biological or social sense. Thereby the argumentation of Rancière, as well as Mouffe, seems to miss the point. It may well be that the public realm has an ontological status in Arendt, in that it creates a notion of reality. But there is no notion in Arendt that we must all agree on what reality looks like. There is not even a notion that we must agree on the idea that we share the same reality. Rather, what the public realm does is to create a sense of reality which makes it possible to ask questions of truth and untruth, on what is real and unreal—questions that would simply make no sense without the pluralistic gathering that constitutes the public realm. The public realm is a kind of excess produced in and through the activities of which human life is capable, not a definition of human life itself.

When Arendt discusses the public realm in the beginning of *The Human Condition*, it is easy to read her as idealizing the *polis* as the open political space of the Greek city-state. What appears to be more interesting, however, is that she opens up the

idea of a public space inhabited by humans, which nevertheless constitutes an excess in relation to humanity; this excess is equated with what Arendt calls *the political*. It is the most worthy aspect of the life of human beings, but it is a non-natural aspect of her being, an excess that can only be understood as lying beyond the life and actions of an individual, or the history and actions of a collective. The political is a form of freedom, but it is a freedom which is impossible to realize or experience in the existential sense. The political in Arendt's philosophy is an impossible freedom, if we think about freedom as the capacity to make choices. Arendt's notion of freedom relies only on that which is inhuman in the life of humans; on differentiation and spacing in the public space. In spite of the fact that Arendt's thought is a form of anthropological philosophy, and steeped in a context where man is present as an historical, acting being, we will always encounter a form of inhuman excess. There is a presence of the inhuman in the human that cannot be reduced to a question of conceptualization. That which is inhuman is also a presence of that which conditions humanity, without being human. Public space is an example of such an excess, made up by humans but still exceeding the presence of subjects. Nor can plurality be reduced to an essentially human concept. Rather, it implies differentiation, natality, new beginnings and breaking points between perspectives.

### Acts of dissensus versus new beginnings: the example of feminine terrorism

I have argued against Rancières critique that Arendt's conception of public space is dependent on an essential definition of the human. What then, about his other contention, that Arendt's notion of public space depends on consensus, and disregards the conflicting problem presented by subjectivities that are not at all recognized as being political?

I would like to bring the argument back to Rancière: if by public space we mean a space of plurality, how can we differentiate between acts undertaken through consensus and acts undertaken through dissensus? What really *is* dissensus, if we do not imply the existence of consensus from the start? Arendt does not imply either.

Terrorism today is associated with religious and/or separatist fanaticism and with the blind violence of suicide bombers. It is regarded as serious attacks against Western democracy and treated as such. In the Europe of the 1960s and 1970s, however, terrorism was associated with forms of political extremism that were intent on revealing the failure of European democracy. Although it was violent, it was not altogether blind. Until it became too bloody, too murderous and too fanatical, political terrorism was not universally condemned. In fact, the Red Army Faction (RAF) itself had stunningly high figures of silent support in the German population before their actions became too violent. It was not an unmentionable option among radical intellectuals to promote "ethical terrorism." "Ethical terrorism" became a voguish concept in the 1960s and 1970s, supported across a vast range of intellectuals not only in Germany but also in France. For instance, Sartre and Beauvoir were selling a radical journal on the streets that was in fact promoting "ethical terrorism." Across Europe in the 1970s, the RAF's political agenda was published and made known to the public. For instance, the manifesto was printed in its entirety in German and covered up as a Swedish popular novel: *Kärlek med förhinder.* It was printed by Bo Cavefors publishers in Sweden, 1977, and then smuggled back into Germany. Figures like Andreas Baader, Gudrun Ensslin and Ulrike Meinhof sparked if not adoration then at least fascination across the left. However, the murders by the RAF and the *Brigate Rosse* (Red Brigades) that took place in Italy during the same period shifted public opinion against the urban guerillas; the demarcation line between terrorism and activism having become clear to those who had earlier sympathized with both. The at-

tacks that were intent on revealing the shortcomings of modern democracy turned out to be a threat to democracy. Towards the end of the 1970s European terrorism was no longer showing an acceptable face. Nevertheless, interest in the main RAF figures continued to grow, their personalities and fate becoming a favored theme in German art, literature and film from the late 1970s, from the novels by Heinrich Böll and the films by Margarethe von Trotta to the paintings by Gerhard Richter.

The filmmaker Margarethe von Trotta, approaches the question of terrorism from a subjective point of view. Clearly showing that it cannot be analyzed at merely a social level, von Trotta makes it a question of how to define political action as such. In the tradition of German political philosophy, through Kant, Arendt and Habermas, for instance, the emancipatory potential of political negotiation is dependent on its location in the public realm. Terrorism would therefore have to define itself as apolitical and secretive, associated with the dark forces attempting to overthrow the ideals of peace and tolerance that are the heritage of the Enlightenment. Von Trotta's films, however, make such a standoff between public realm and terrorist action, between enlightenment and fanaticism, and between emancipation and extremism inherently problematic. Instead, she shows the tradition of the enlightenment which has marked not only German philosophy, but also its political and cultural history, to produce contradictions that exist side by side with each other, rather than excluding each other. Von Trotta's films depict a Germany marked by violent geographical, social and political divisions. Serving as allegories of those divisions and their particular history, her characters indicate the extremes that marked political life in the 1970s; a traumatic separation between East and West, between politics and terrorism, between media and morality, between the consciousness of the individual and collective guilt, between the debates taking place in public space and the terrorist actions attempting to undermine the legitimacy of such spaces. The issues depicted cut across the boundaries defined in the

philosophical tradition and problematizes them; the promise of emancipation that has been the guiding principle of German political philosophy ever since Kant is shown to be not only stifled but in fact made impossible through the development of German history.

One particular thread that runs through von Trotta's films is connected to what has been said above; they portray the question of terrorism to be not only a German-historical problem, but a problem which crosses into a domain where the question of the political would have to be analysed in relation to the legitimate function of public space. The films of von Trotta open up issues in relation to politics that have engaged contemporary philosophy, namely, what deficiencies define the subject in relation to the state, and the public realm defined by that state? In what sense can we relate current definitions of the political to a public realm where various subjectivities, historically, have been oppressed or rather excluded? To what extent can terrorist acts be interpreted as symptomatic not only of the excluded subject but of the subject as such in relation to such a realm? Von Trotta's films suggest a link between terrorist acts and the kinds of repression which modern democracy has proven not only to tolerate, but even help produce. In other words, the question of terrorism is not only answered through historical references, but more importantly through the way subjectivity is produced by the modern state and its construction of public realm. Von Trotta's women are terroristic by nature or by proxy: Katarina Blum's love for a bank robber can only be allegorical of a terrorist, the insubmissive sister in *Marianne and Juliane* winds up in jail through her uncompromising resistance, while the main figure of von Trotta's best-known film, *Rosa Luxemburg,* leads a movement through which forced attacks on the establishment were part of the agenda. Such fascination for the female terrorist is built not merely on psychological interest, or solidarity, or catharsis. The films show female subjectivity to be the product of an impossible double-bind; the violence directed against the

state is produced by the violence exerted by the state on the female subject as such, since that subject is also excluded from the public realm. In this way, the female subject becomes an exemplary subject of violence, not only oppressed by the state but violated by those same laws that are said to carry the promise of emancipation. Von Trotta is not merely depicting the destiny of female terrorists; she is placing herself on the side of the modern subject of disavowal.

Released toward the end of the flourishing years of New German Cinema in the 1970s, *Die bleierne Zeit* ("The Leaden Years") or in English *Marianne and Juliane* (1981), is a film about two sisters, one of whom chooses the terrorist path while the other is a politically motivated journalist. The film is inspired by the life and fate of Gudrun Ensslin, one of the founders of the RAF and, together with Ulrike Meinhof and Andreas Baader, one of its leaders. Von Trotta shows two women that function like mirrors of one another. The terrorist Marianne incarnates a position of dissensus; she represents a position of exclusion or a form of subjectivity not recognized by the political, as it is defined in the public realm. Juliane is more able to protest in a constructive way. The film shows her to have been the more rebellious sister early on, reading Sartre in her youth and perpetually challenging conservative gender roles. As an adult, she works as a journalist for a feminist magazine. Juliane is meanwhile engaging in traditional work for emancipation in compliance with the rules set up by society, using the public realm to advance her political work: writing in the press and demonstrating for the rights of abortion, for instance. However, Juliane's belief in the system comes to a standstill at the moment of her sister's death. From that point on, Juliane will dedicate her life to proving that her sister did not take her life but instead was murdered; the victim of a state more violent than the criminal it has imprisoned. Juliane inherits Marianne's stance of disavowal or extreme dissensus, of the kind through which public realm has set itself up as the only possibility of emancipation.

The film ultimately shows the collapse of both women, each position proving impossible to sustain. Neither terrorism, nor the public realm which traditionally has been considered the realm of emancipation, allows for the freedom of the subject to come into being. Beyond the contract of protection and freedom lies an imaginary realm of projective identification. When the promise of public realm is made too strong, or may seem too weak, it begins to appear transparent and faulty, producing rejection and hatred as a consequence, thus disjoining the possibilities of emancipation as construed through history and culture.

### The end of violence?

In his dialogue with Derrida in *Philosophy in a Time of T*error, Habermas argues that only the constitution can serve as protection against terrorism, provided that the constitution does not set boundaries on tolerance of minorities. A democratic constitution must, in the end, also tolerate civil disobedience and other forms of protest which for some may appear threatening to the constitutional order.[4] It is difficult to get beyond the impression, however, that Habermas' idea for a new constitution that would serve as normative rather than restrictive, amounts to a new form of social contract. The complication added to the idea of constitutional patriotism, forwarded by Habermas, in light of terrorist nihilism when it comes to comparing "just" and "unjust" violence, is that Habermas does not discuss the possible violence implied in the founding of a new law. Von Trotta's obsession with Germany and her staging of Germany in the symbolic figure of two women must be seen as complicating the Habermasian belief in "constitutional" patriotism—there is no

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[4] See Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp. 41–43, and Jürgen Habermas, "Yet Again: German identity – A Unified Nation of Angry DM-Burghers" in *When the Wall came Down*, Harold James and Marla Stone (eds) (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 86–102, p. 97.

"neutral" ground on which to stand from which we could discuss these matters in the public realm. One may even argue that the violence exerted by the RAF is motivated by the failure of the public realm, and the weakness of its future promises for emancipation.

Von Trotta's film shows a culture where the work for international solidarity has become perverted into the form of terrorism, and where the work for emancipation in public space has become equally perverted. *Die bleierne Zeit* is in many ways preoccupied with the same themes as the film on *Rosa Luxemburg*, the two sisters attempting to pursue the work of Luxemburg. Whereas Rosa has a constructive vocation for international solidarity and peace, however, the political engagement of the two sisters is marked by death and confusion.

It is not only for reasons of historical guilt that von Trotta is interested in the fate of the German Jew. In her films, the fate of the Jew is linked to that of women; a fact which gives us a further clue to her depiction of terrorist subjectivity in *Die bleierne Zeit*. In von Trotta's films, women and Jews alike fail to identify not only with the ideology of German nationalism but with the construction of the contractual relation between citizen and state, through which public space is considered to give the only possibilities of political action. In *The Women in Rosenstrasse* (2003), she examines a historical episode in which German women, married to Jews, managed to reclaim their men from Nazi persecution. Such a historical incident evokes not only the intrinsic relation between German femininity and Jewishness, both disidentifying with certain aspects of German history, but also the intrinsic threat posed to those that are excluded by the state and from the public realm—Jews and women alike. After *Marianne and Juliane*, von Trotta's biggest success was her film on *Rosa Luxemburg* (1986), depicting the fate of the spartacist leader. In her essay on Luxemburg in *Men in Dark Times*, Hannah Arendt emphasizes her Jewishness above her feminity. In her film, however, von Trotta reverses the two emphases. Both, however,

come to the same conclusion concerning her activism: the violence directed towards the state is the result of a necessary disidentification, not to be seen as mere destructiveness but rather as the attempt to liberate another way of defining politics, allowing for European politics to leave the enlightenment tradition of a contractual body politic behind, as well as the traditional spaces for political action.[5] Von Trotta, like Arendt, wants to show that Luxemburg incorporated the true possibilities of a proletarian kind of cosmopolitanism at a certain historic moment. Her murder by the *Freikorps*, a right-wing extremist paramilitary group later to form the core of Hitler's supporters in his rise to power, incarnated a true watershed in European history. Not only did it set back the revolt on the left and the worker's movement, as well as their cause; it was, above all, a setback for all internationalist attempts to conceptualize and create a different form of Europe, to place international solidarity above nationalism in the wake of the First World War and to form an alternative to the nation state in European politics.

One must look upon Arendt's idealization of public space of the *polis* in this light. It is because the public spaces of modernity have failed that she returns to ancient Greece. It is because the modern public spaces are so bound up with the nation-state that she wishes to ontologize the political, beyond the idea of public space as being defined and controlled by the nation-state. In this, the stance of Arendt is quite different from that of Habermas. To Habermas, public space serves the nation-state and enhances its legitimacy. To Arendt, the legitimacy of the modern nation-state has been in doubt ever since the persecution of the Jews. The function of public space can never be emancipation in the sense of the Enlightenment; that is, it can never serve goal-oriented

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[5] Arendt explains Luxemburg's anti-nationalism not as a disavowal of German culture, but rather a reaction to the fact that the Jews of Europe were the first Europeans; identifying not with one single nation but rather with European commonality and languages. Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (London: Harvest, 1968), p. 42.

political purposes. Therefore the question of consensus or dissensus does not really matter. What matters is the making real of reality—the differentiation, individuation and creation of individuals and objects that appear, that take on weight and texture as being reality itself. Only in considering public space as a space of new beginnings can we account for the possibilities which modern politics may offer.

# Author Biographies

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Associate Professor of History of Art and Visual Culture at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Her writings have appeared in *Frieze, Diacritics, Inscriptions, Art Journal,* and *Bomb.* Her essays on race and digital culture have appeared in *The Cyborg Handbook* and *Race in Cyberspace.* Recipient of the Joanne Cassullo Teaching Fellowship, Professor González teaches at the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program. Her book *Sub-*

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An art critic and graffiti artist, who has worked as editor of the international graffiti magazine *Underground Productions* and written about graffiti in both his BA and MA theses. He is currently working on his Ph.D.

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Professor in Aesthetics at Södertörn University in Stockholm. Her latest books are *The Antigone Complex; Ethics and the Invention of Feminine Desire* (Stanford University Press, 2004) and *Kristeva and the Political* (Routledge, 2005).

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The public realm is indeed a space of paradoxes. While on one hand it seems to be shrinking due to commercialization and to be losing its position as a forum where different agendas can meet, it can also be said to be expanding through social media and thus merge with traditional "private" areas.

The contributions in this volume range from philosophical and political takes on the idea of the public to texts that understand the current situation from the point of view of the art scene. Thinkers such as Chantal Mouffe, Jürgen Habermas and Giorgio Agamben meet, for example, with local Swedish graffiti, the international digital world and multicultural New Delhi. All offer perspectives on what the public—and the private—realms might mean today.