

FROM THE PUBLIC NATURE OF ART TO THE NATURE OF PUBLIC ART

CONSIDERATIONS ON THE CHANGING SPACES AND MODES OF EXHIBITING

A B S T R A C T

In this paper I am offering some reflections on the intertwined relationship between works of art and their audience by looking at the changing spaces and ways of exhibiting. While art pieces had often been and still are “public”, their status and definition have changed throughout the centuries. After historical considerations I quote some contemporary examples of innovative approaches to the interpretation of the publicness of art. These show new modes of acquiring audience, of re-interpreting the connection between artwork and its public and of reviewing the current state of the art infrastructure and its institutions.

How did the public and the public presentation of art change throughout the centuries? Which aspects can help us understanding the key features in the complex relationship between the artwork, the modes of its exhibiting and the perceiving of the work by the audience? How do these influence the contemporary approaches towards presenting? Given the truly broad range of the topic of art and its public feature, in the following I would like to examine just some of the many particulars that can add to the apprehension of these subjects, thus inviting the reader for further reflection on the topic.

Starting our considerations on art and its possible and changing ways and challenges of being presented, let's recall three works in their context. The three pieces are from different periods, separated by several centuries, different geographical locations and especially created in different media. The first can be considered as a classical public monument: Donatello's monumental bronze sculpture dedicated to the military leader Erasmo da Narni, nicknamed Gattamelata, from around 1450, situated in the middle of Padua. A "classical public monument" as I described above, and, actually, it is classical in both senses: in its execution, reminding the observer to the greatest prior examples of the genre, starting from the Roman bronze equestrian sculptures. However, the work is also classical because of its function and functioning: honouring and immortalising an important figure in a central and public square of the city. The community thus pays homage to the commemorated person by having him eternalised through the means of art and through the skilled hands of the renowned early Renaissance sculptor.

One might find at the beginning a bit difficult to imagine my second example being interpreted as an artwork, since officially it is a museum. However, as we learn about the intentions of its founder, we can understand that it can be just as well an artwork of its own, and not merely a collection of objects. Sir John Soane's Museum in London is located in the famous eighteenth and nineteenth century architect's former home. As an avid collector of artworks, especially of classical ones, including architectural fragments from the Antiquity, sculptures, paintings, building designs and books, his house became an impressive temple of art during his life already. Having bequeathed both the property and the entire collection as a generous gift to the nation in 1833, his instruction was to leave everything as it is, hence when the modern day observer enters (for free) to visit Soane's home, she might get a pretty authentic impression of how the architect-collector lived among his treasures and how he wanted them to be preserved for, presented to and enjoyed by future generations.¹ This is why, although it is a proper museum, but the overwhelming accumulation and extremely dense, though highly accurate display of the pieces almost makes the entire home a carefully created monumental and unique artwork.



Figure 1. Braco Dimitrijević: CASUAL PASSERBY I MET AT 11.09 AM, Paris, 1971
Collection: Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou Paris

The third work is a piece from the “Casual Passer-by” series by Braco Dimitrijević, from the 1970s. In this series, the artist randomly chose his subjects, photographed them individually on the street, and then had the large-scale portraits displayed on public places, e.g. the facades of well-seen and important buildings. The observers who walked on the street, and were just as “casual” or average as the subjects of the photographs could easily get confused, since traditionally such a good visibility is provided for the particular, for the “above average”, the ones who need to be commemorated or celebrated, like rulers, politicians or heroes – like we saw Gattamelata above. Through the series Dimitrijević examined the effect of and through the display, i.e. how the presentation itself contributes to and even widens the concept of artwork: publicness or even “publicity” of the private individuals made the images, that seemed like having the objectivity of a passport photo, into complex works of art by investigating the effects and extending the limits of portrait and display, as well as, to quote Elizaveta Butakova, “by putting ordinary citizens in the place of leaders, Dimitrijević aimed to reveal the implicit social and cultural codes that serve hierarchies of power.”² What’s more, we need to add that the showing of the monumental portraits were temporary, and they were documented on other, smaller photos, showing the portrait itself hanging on the building, and this latter documentation is just as much part of the artwork as the original installation.

At first, these three initial examples seem to be completely different – deriving from distinct time periods, located in various countries and created in dissimilar media. What still connects them is that all might be interpreted as three forms of not only showing artworks but even of experimenting with this very public presentation of art itself. Or, we could also say: three ways of contextualising and analysing the possibilities of the relationship between art and its public. Hence they all, besides being artworks on their own right, also manifest a particular approach to and interpretation of what and how the space of art could be, in what modes the work interacts with the public; how its significance should be perceived, examined, appreciated and disseminated. They thus not only take in consideration but also analyse the public character of art, its connection to the audience. Without entering the many possible questions regarding the changing concept and function of works of art through history, we can observe that spaces and modes of the presentation have changed in parallel with the concept of artwork and with the role of art itself. Hence just like the definition of art and the idea about its function changed, so had their spaces and modes of public presentation. (Art) objects were displayed and shown where it was best to adequately fulfil their function. For example in classical Antiquity temples contained sculptures of the Graeco-Roman gods while along the roads one

could find commemorative and votive sculptures of the community's heroes or even of the winners of sport events. Roman emperors' portraits adorned public squares just like religious scenes decorated the churches few centuries later.

Today many of these pieces we find in museums or in art collections. Their status has changed, in great part due to the new location, but not their publicness. Most of these works have not lost their public character at all, since they can be visited by the public in their new location, often even for free. Nevertheless, their status had been changed or modified right through the act of becoming artworks presented in a definitely de-contextualised way of the modern museum. The pieces entered the collection or museum when they had become artworks in the modern sense of this concept, and having had at the same time something lost and enlarged in their status: for the modern viewer they might have significantly lost in their original and primary role and function as for example political or religious representations or revocations of certain mythological or ethical contexts and values. But at the same time they have gained with becoming artworks for their own sake, being enjoyed for the complex aesthetic and intellectual qualities that they might feature, and that naturally organically contain the original purposes why the work was created, though are obviously more than that primary function. However, the reasons of modern aesthetic enjoyment and art historical appreciation of works outgrow the original aims of the creator or commissioner of the work.

The start of this new appreciation, as well as the beginning of the modern collection of art pieces in general and the new form of public display of the collected works in particular thus went hand in hand with the depriving of the objects of the exclusivity of their original function. Early forms of such exhibitions we can see in the case of the amazing *Kunst und Wunderkammern*, i.e. in those "cabinets of curiosities" that formed the basis of the royal and aristocratic collections. Here, in the period from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century the difference and especially the differentiation between the natural and artistic wonders were still blurred, therefore in these intriguing accumulations of fascinating objects one could find both pieces that today would be shown in a natural history museum and others that could certainly find their place in a fine art collection. The display of these collections, just like the observation of the pieces shown itself defined the earliest forms of collection visits – just like we can see in the paintings of for example David Teniers the Younger, who several times depicted the collection of Archduke Leopold around 1650. And, in fact, this has turned into the proper public presentation of the formerly partly private royal and aristocratic collections, for instance in the case of the Louvre; the visit of the interested and now already wider public was documented by

Huber Robert when showing the interior of the new galleries of the Louvre in various works from the 1790s. Art had become even more explicitly common good and a source of national pride that obviously led to the rivalry between the countries to accumulate the best works and to proudly display them for the widest possible public.

Finally what interests us here just as much as the historical forerunners is the contemporary scene, and the questions concerning the public character of artworks as well as the artistic investigation of the publicness in today's global art world. From many aspects and based on the news about the latest developments in the contemporary context, we can assume having such an important shift of paradigms concerning the concepts and ways of presenting works and of bringing them to the public attention that can easily be compared to the changes around the eighteenth century. Today we are regularly encountering and are often even involved in new experiments about art and its public, and these new approaches investigating the public character of art are affecting its modes of display and appearance. In certain cases it is the continuation of the various forms of reconsidering or mocking the art establishment and infrastructure that was an often-recurring theme in classical avant-garde too, while in other instances it can be read as radically new forms of criticising the institutions themselves. This latter, i.e. the novel ways of expressing critique against traditional platforms of publicising art is especially exciting for two reasons. On the one hand, because it is often directed exactly against those forms that were established in the eighteenth and nineteenth century and which in those days were welcomed as certain sort of guarantors of the democratisation of art and of the freedom of the artists, including the museum, institutes of the art commerce, and later the private galleries. On the other hand these current critical works are also thrilling because they wrap their critique in new artworks; hence this opposing against the infrastructure leads not only to fertile theoretical discussions, but also to both aesthetically and intellectually fascinating pieces. Just think of for example when Elmgreen & Dragset staged an art fair in the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing in 2016 titled "The Well Fair", that at the beginning might have exactly looked like a traditional art fair with booths, artworks on the wall and gallerists. However, the whole "fair" was entirely fictional, without proper sellers working or galleries participating, and all the over eighty exhibited works were from Elmgreen & Dragset. The show thus critically and satirically investigated the ambiguous world of contemporary art commerce. With the choice that the duo had exhibited only their own works on the walls they had not only "eliminated the typical aspects of competitive valuation between artists,"³ but also expressed their critique against the often overrated world of art business. Hence it is not an immodest and flamboyantly



Figure 2. Elmgreen & Dragset: The Well Fair. Installation View, 2016
Photography by Eric Gregory Powell
Courtesy Ullens Center for Contemporary Art.



Figure 3. Erbossyn Meldibekov: Gattamelata in the Hide of Genghis Khan, 1999
Mixed media installation with horse hooves
200 x 180 x 70 cm
Edition 4/4 plus 1 AP
Permanent Collection of the YARAT Contemporary Art Space (www.yarat.az)
Image courtesy: View from exhibition Making Histories, the YARAT Collection (YARAT Centre, Baku, March 2015 – April 2016), Curated by Suad Garayeva. Photo by Fakhriyya Mammadova, YARAT, 2015

pretentious act to promote their own oeuvre, but just the contrary: with this ironic self-reference they managed to describe in a witty and critical way the utterly self-celebratory world of art fairs where, as it often happens, instead of the aesthetic or artistic qualities of the pieces shown, the emphasis is rather given on the jollification of the collectors and on the pure commercial act around the hyped art pieces. The institutional critique is naturally also manifested in the fact that the “fair” – with the works not for sale – was organised in a museum, hence the show had become a proper and comprehensive art installation or Gesamtkunstwerk, with many spatial, medial and conceptual transformations: non-profit museum to (fictive) for-profit fair, within the framework of the exhibition of one large installation containing dozens of individual artworks.

We have started with showing three examples of “public” art, when either the work or its display – or both – demonstrated different ways of entering, sometimes indirectly though, in the discourse about the public features of art. Hence we can see that these changes of getting in connection with the audience can be part of history itself, i.e. of the normal change throughout the times of presenting art. Needless to say, however, that many of the new spaces of showing pieces today, including for example supermarkets or malls, are definitely not the traditional semi-sacred spaces of the museum or of the white cube galleries where we are used to observe the works since at least the late eighteenth century. However, these new places and forms of exhibiting can often be part of the new experiments, and may become effective means of helping to gain new audience, as long as the exposition respects the essence and primary qualities of the work, without over-commercialising it, or using and abusing the art piece for (self)-promotion of the space. In this regard for example, the recent experiment of the Polygone Riviera is curious and for some it might be a bit dubious too: the Foundation Maeght has loaned five sculptures by Juan Miró in a newly built luxury shopping mall on the French Riviera. Miró is certainly an important artist, though the organisers have likely thought of choosing him also because of his popularity. Besides this however – according to Anna Sansom’s report in *The Art Newspaper* – the owners of the mall and the appointed curator Jérôme Sans are also planning to commission new artworks for a permanent display on their premises.⁴

Apart from this initiative we can quote another work, thus also reconnecting to our first example in the beginning of this essay, and in order to show a really exciting example of a contemporary art piece that fruitfully scrutinises both the public nature of art and the nature of public art. The Kazakh Erbossyn Meldibekov’s 1999 work titled “Gattamelata in the Hide of Genghis Khan”⁵ examines the iconic Western art historical example from a Central Asian

perspective, where from the portrait of the horseman only the feet of the horse remain, thus mocking the desire towards eternal monumentality, known from the recent Soviet history of many countries not only in the Central Asian region but also in Eastern Europe. The work could also be imagined as a proper public artwork, not only as museum or gallery piece, being a nice example how its multiple aspects and references can function. On the one hand, the critical evaluation and the re-reading of the (recent) past and heritage of the local art infrastructure raises questions whose analyses at the end turn to be inspiring also on a global scale. On the other hand, Erbossyn Meldibekov's semi-monument invites us to re-think and evaluate the history of connection of art and its public(ness), at least in the temporal perspective what the work's title evokes, between Donatello and our age – if not even way beyond.

NOTES

- 1 See Abraham Thomas' preface in: *Sir John Soane's Museum. A Complete Description* (London: Sir John Soane's Museum, 2014), IX.
- 2 From Elizaveta Butakova's summary of another work from the same series, on the website of the TATE, February 2010: <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/dimitrijevic-casual-passer-by-i-met-at-1-43-pm-venice-1976-t12557>.
- 3 Quoted from UCCA's website: <http://ucca.org.cn/en/exhibition/the-well-fair-2/>.
- 4 Anna Sansom, "Trend for art in shopping malls hits France," *The Art Newspaper*, June 9, 2016, http://theartnewspaper.com/news/trend-for-art-in-shopping-malls-hits-france/?utm_source=daily_june7_2016&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=email_daily.
- 5 Exhibited in the opening exhibition of YARAT Contemporary art space, Baku, Azerbaijan in 2015, and currently part of YARAT's travelling collection show.

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OD JAVNE PRIRODE UMETNOSTI DO PRIRODE JAVNE UMETNOSTI:
RAZMATRANJA PROMENLJIVOSTI MESTA I NACINA IZLAGANJA

Zoltán Somhegyi

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