

ARTICLE

Public-Private v Social Space

Tom Trevor

“Space is not a thing but rather a set of relations between things”
Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 1974

There is often discussion of the artist making an intervention in public space, but what exactly do we mean by ‘public space’? The ideal of a shared open arena that belongs to all of us, a neutral container for civic activities, is unrealistic. Increasingly our city centres, for example, are privately owned developments, policed by private security firms, narrowly focused on creating the conditions to generate maximum returns in terms of shopping and spending. Through so-called ‘open malls’, such as Milton Keynes city centre that can be locked down completely at night, or enormous new regeneration schemes, such as the Paradise Street Development in Liverpool, the concept of the civic centre has been re-defined in the interests of capital, essentially becoming a privatised domain governed by its own laws.

A key feature of these new ‘private-public’ spaces is the set of rules governing behaviour that ensure only certain types of activities and certain types of people will be allowed to enjoy them. Typically in private-public space beggars and the homeless are ‘moved on’ by private security, while activities such as skateboarding, smoking or drinking alcohol are banned. Such policies, which overlap with the government’s anti-social behaviour agenda, come under the banner of ‘reclaiming the public realm’, with proponents arguing that they provide a ‘clean and safe’ environment. Critics on the other hand claim they create sterile, uniform places, which inhibit genuine public access and lack the diversity and particularity of traditional street life, while also displacing social problems into neighbouring ghettoised areas of deprivation.

As a concept, public space can be traced back at least as far as the ancient Greek agora. The agora or marketplace was the place where citizens came to meet, talk, trade and vote, intertwining the concepts of democracy and citizenship with public space. But as citizenship rights in ancient Greek democracy were denied to free, non-foreign men and denied to slaves, women and foreigners more than half the population were not part of this ‘public’, and were excluded from the arena for debate. Lack of inclusion, then, as much as citizenship, has characterised the nature of public space from the outset. Access is clearly a key issue, as is the question of who controls the space, determining whom it is or is not allowed to use it. Of course, ownership plays a central role in this. Today nearly all so-called public space is owned by somebody – be it the Crown, government, private organisations, individuals or financial institutions such as pension funds or international consortia.

For an artist to place an artwork in this highly-policed cultural context therefore either requires a great degree of collusion, with the artist essentially working in the interests of the ‘owners’ of private-public space, or some form of transgression, as an active resistance against the dominant hierarchy. However, even the most transgressive acts can easily be absorbed by the capitalist machine which thrives upon such power struggles. Banksy’s illicit graffiti stencillings, for example, celebrated by the media as highly subversive interventions in the public domain, have rapidly been recuperated as expensive art commodity. Although the word ‘intervention’ by its very nature implies some kind of counter-hegemonic process, it is now accepted as a legitimate form of art and is often carried out with the full endorsement of cultural institutions. Thus, in order to reflect critically upon the placement of art in the public realm, it is imperative to first examine the underlying power mechanisms that define this cultural construct. The Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci’s re-working of the concept of ‘hegemony’ theorised the ways in which one set of moral, political and cultural values is seemingly ‘naturalised’ as

everyday ‘common sense’ so as to support the interests of a dominant social group. As part of this normative process, the mainstream cultural institutions work to reproduce and affirm these privileged meanings and values as the ‘natural order’.

As cultural theorist, Raymond Williams puts it:

[Hegemony] is a lived system of meanings and values – constitutive and constituting – which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming. It thus constitutes a sense of reality for most people in the society, a sense of absolute experienced reality beyond which it is very difficult for most members of the society to move, in most areas of their lives. It is, that is to say, in the strongest sense a ‘culture’ [a whole way of life], but a culture which has also to be seen as the lived dominance and subordination of particular classes.¹

The privileging of one social group’s ‘meanings and values’ over others will inevitably be contested by those who are implicitly subordinated, through resistant cultural traditions and practices as well as more direct oppositional means. Resistance may not always be conscious, active or open (often it will be latent and largely symbolic, as in the counter-hegemonic attitudes of popular culture) but, as Stuart Hall says, “it is through the medium of culture that people transform the mundane phenomena of the material world into a world of significant symbols to which they give meaning and attach value.”² Thus ‘culture’ is a domain, no less than the political and the economic, in which social relations of dominance and subordination are negotiated and resisted, where meanings are not imposed but contested, and where there is a constant process of appropriation and re-absorption as part of an on-going power struggle.

Within this “socially-produced space”, as Henri Lefebvre describes it, “state-imposed normality makes permanent transgression inevitable.”³ Lefebvre argues that every society in history produces a distinctive ‘social space’, as a reflection of its political and economic requirements. However, in contrast to a mathematical idea of space in which the terrain is conceived of as stable, unchanging and devoid of external forces, social space is contingent and constantly in a process of negotiation, produced by the “interactions and inter-relationships of different subjectivities and social forces.”⁴ Each of us is ‘situated’ within this shifting web of social relations, making and re-making our place in dialogue with the wider cultural geography.

Within any social space there is a plurality of overlapping histories and traditions, or ‘maps of meaning’, which relate, in very different ways, to the dominant attitudes of everyday life, and thus to the distribution of power in society. This multi-layered cultural terrain is constantly contested according to particular (ultimately economic) interests within the social hierarchy. With the recognition of a plurality of cultures (‘high’ and ‘low’, black and white, masculine and feminine, gay and straight, urban and rural, etc) it is clear that different meanings and values will conflict and compete for ascendancy in accordance with the underlying power structures of society.

Making an intervention within ‘social space’ is clearly a very different conceptual activity to the conventional idea of placing an artwork in public space. The site is not so much a physical location as an abstract set of relationships, informed by different histories and traditions as well as the underlying interests of different groups in society. As with James Clifford’s notion of the ethnographer as a ‘participant observer’⁵, the ultimate site of interrogation must therefore be one’s own relation to the cultural hegemony.

In his critique of passive consumer culture, *The Society of the Spectacle*⁶, Guy Debord uses the Situationist principles of détournement, defined as ‘communication that includes a critique of itself’, in order to turn the attention of consumers of spectacle culture back towards material considerations of everyday life and historical struggle. As late capitalism has fetishized the ‘sign’, or images of consumerism, Debord shows that by adopting the language of spectacle culture but including a reflexive critique within it the underlying contradictions are revealed. Reflexivity, as a turning back on oneself, a form of self-awareness, is the key to unpacking the power structures implicit within the language we employ to describe the world.⁷

At the same time it is crucial to understand both the interconnectedness of social discourse and how different ‘maps of meaning’ overlap. Each of us occupies a multiplicity of ‘cultural geographies’ at the same time. In his last book, *The Three Ecologies*⁸, Felix Guattari extended the definition of ecology to encompass social relations and human subjectivity as well as environmental concerns. He argued that just as nature is threatened by the forces of globalisation, so is society and our own mental health. Thus ‘social space’ is a complex system, made up of a shifting web of social, psychological and environmental relationships. For the artist, to make a meaningful intervention in social space therefore requires a reflexive understanding of one’s own implication in this web of interrelatedness as well as the power structures implicit within the language we chose to describe it. What is required is a kind of poetics of subjective and social transformation. Making meaning is a social activity, and what is meaningful on a personal level, is at the same time culturally defined, in a historical and social context.

As Lefebvre puts it, “(social) space is a (social) product.”⁹

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¹ Williams, Raymond (1983) *Keywords*, Oxford University Press, USA

² Hall, Stuart & Jefferson, Tony (Eds) (1976) *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*. London: Routledge

³ Lefebvre, Henri (1974) *The Production of Space*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell

⁴ ibid

⁵ Clifford, James (1988) *The Predicament of Culture*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press

⁶ Debord, Guy (1995) *The Society of the Spectacle*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press

⁷ However, to argue that the character of the world is in part due to the concepts employed to describe it, is to employ those very concepts. Indeed the philosopher Jacques Derrida argues that to understand that knowledge is a product of language is to do so within language itself, and therefore that there is “nothing beyond the text”.

⁸ Guattari, Felix (2008) *The Three Ecologies*, London: Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd

⁹ Lefebvre, Henri (1974) *The Production of Space*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell

Tom Trevor has been Director of Arnolfini, Bristol, since 2005. He was previously Director of Spacex, in Exeter, from 1999-2005. He studied Fine Art at The Ruskin, University of Oxford, and Goldsmiths, University of London. In the early 1990s he worked as an artist based in London, as well as a music producer for television.

His recent curatorial work has focussed on contextual and socially engaged practices. www.arnolfini.org.uk

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