

No Place for Urban Art

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Abstract

The following is an attempt to situate Urban Art within the philosophical tradition with and against Plato's exclusion of the mimetic artist from the well-ordered city-state. It takes into account modern as well as postmodern literature on the concept of art and the city in order to rehabilitate a place for art within the city limits without sacrificing its potential to call into question any clear-cut limit the philosophical tradition has attempted to draw around the concepts of the subject, the work of art and the city itself.

Keywords: Plato, urban art, subject, latency, non-place

1 Introduction

From the outset, philosophy's relation to art is marked by an exclusion. When Plato banned the poets from the philosophically ordered city he reserved for art only a non-place in his philosophical system. Any concept of urban art must by definition renounce Plato's judgment, however, we claim, it must at the same time accept it. It has to accept it insofar as art always eludes philosophy's grasp; insofar as the artistic activity cannot be accounted for in terms of a rational subject. It is justified to reject it nevertheless as the non-place of art harbours the possibility of an opening towards the re-imagination and transformation of the city.

2

From the beginning any discourse on art finds itself arrested, held up inescapably, by a difficulty. "This difficulty", Maurice Blanchot remarks, "illuminates from the outset, the anomaly which is the essence of literary activity which the writer both must and must not overcome." (Blanchot, 1995: 303) Blanchot's concern of course is with the writer of literature, the implications involved, however, bear heavily on art in general – they pertain to the relation of artist and work as such: "[I]n order to write, he must have the talent to write. But gifts, in themselves, are nothing. As long as he has not

yet set down at his table and written a work, the writer is not a writer and does not know if he has the capacity to become one. He has no talent until he has written, but he needs talent in order to write." (Blanchot, 1995: 303) This is the paradox at the origin of any artwork and memorably the paradox at the beginning of Heidegger's *The Origin of the Work of Art*: "According to the general view, the work arises out of and through the activity of the artist. But through and from what is the artist that which he is? Through the work.. (Heidegger, 2002: 1) Blanchot draws this paradox from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*: "The individual who is going to act seems, therefore, to find himself in a circle in which each moment already presupposes the other, and thus he seems unable to find a beginning, because he only gets to know his original nature, which must be his End, from the deed, while, in order to act, he must have that End beforehand." (Hegel, 1977: 240)

Hegel will move on from this paradox by way of the dialectical method: "Talent, action, and end, being intimately interconnected (*verknüpft*) as his own moments are sublated from the start." (Gasché, 1999: 317) However, we take this moment of the interruption of Hegel in Blanchot as our point of departure as it presents us with the possibility to reject any hasty step of conventional view and lets the artwork

itself come forth in all its contradictory force.

This force of paradox is not only at the origin of the work of art but also at the origin of the discourse on art in the Western tradition. It has informed the trouble- and quarrelsome relation of philosophy and art ever since. When it comes to the paradox, Plato had the clearest idea of this: "The mimeticians are the worst possible breed because they are no one, pure mask or pure hypocrisy, and as such unassignable, unidentifiable, impossible to place in a determined class or to fix in a function that would be proper to them and would find its place in a just distribution of tasks." (Lacou-Labarthe, 1989: 259) This is reason enough for Plato to banish the poets from the well-ordered city. Philosophy has thus, although negatively, established an originary bond between art and the city. A bond which no philosophically informed account of Urban Art may ignore. The artistic activity can therefore not be considered a power but rather a force, which is power's other. It is not reducible to the individual power, talent or natural capacity of the artist-subject but is pre-subjective or beyond subjectivity. – In any case, monstrous. (Menke, 2018). It emanates from a latency period within the artistic activity.

2.1

Latency is defined as "[t]he interval between the reception of a stimulus and the response to that stimulus" (OED). This can pertain to an action, performed unconsciously or precisely planned to the last detail, that has not yet been reflected. Between action and reaction there is a reaction time x , a latency period. Similar to the motion speed of objects in natural physical space, no mathematical precalculation can take full account of this interval without allowing for a tolerance range. External influences such as wind, temperature fluctuation etcetera. are crucial here. All calculation and assertion before the fact can only be speculative. The architect knows this all too well. The same is true for the organic body, say the physical condition of a body giving birth, or being threatened by a disease. In each case, the life expectancy of the host is not guaranteed. Time in our case cannot take account of the wonder of birth, nor the life expectancy of the subject. Just as little as the speed of objects travelling from A to B can determine the moment of impact. It can only function as the summation of events just before the explosion, the liberation

of the visible, which, enclosed in invisibility, constantly multiplies and disseminates its spores ready to interlink. A static emerges which in a given system turns into noise. Like an implicit thought that carries content without describing it, that erupts without warning and will have already secured its *raison d'être*. Latency in this sense, structures from the ground up, underneath its surface any closed system. If art is the force that no closed system of thought can account for, then its condition of possibility can only be situated in the realm of latency, which structures from a non-place any place within the city.

2.2

Urban Art specifically harbours an intimate relationship to the non-place, which, especially in Marc Augé's (1995) conception describes those places within the city that Street Art has always made use of: "transit points", "railway stations", "interchanges". In his terminology the city is structured by a weave of anthropological places and non-places: "As anthropological places create the organically social, so non-places create solitary contractuality." (Augé, 1995: 94) The non-place is the place of the social contract, it is not the place of natural communion. The classical opposition of nature and culture is translated into that of the center and the periphery: "the housing estate [...], where people do not live together and which is never situated in the centre of anything (big estates characterize the so-called peripheral zones or outskirts)." (Augé, 1995: 107-108) If we care so much for the peripheral, it is because we are of the opinion that the artist always works from a non-place. As Augé puts it, "a person entering a non-place is relieved of all his usual determinants. He becomes no more than what he does or experiences in the role of passenger, customer or driver." (Augé, 1995: 103) The non-place becomes the dystopian version of Plato's philosophically ordered city, the dwelling place of the mimetic artist, the actor, the non-subject and the self divided from itself. In fact: "The non-place is the opposite of utopia: it exists, and it does not contain any organic society." (Augé, 1995: 111)

If the anthropological place is identified as a "plac[e] of identity" predicated upon on a whole set of state legislation ("The layout of the house, the rules of residence, the zoning of the village, placement of altars, configuration of public open spaces, land distribution, correspond for every individual to

a system of possibilities, prescriptions and interdicts whose content is both spatial and social.” (Augé, 1995: 107-108)), the non-place marks the impossibility of this legislated city. And, from the spaces of this impossibility, urban art opens unto the possibility of “other cities”. This opening is what Alison Young refers to as the “uncommissioned city”: “In the legislated city [...] the notion of the ‘space-between’ is repeatedly overlooked or taken for granted. [...] For the inhabitants of the uncommissioned city, however, through-passage gives rise to the potential to alter a streetscape in a range of ways.” (Young, 2014: 54) It is here that urban art takes place, in the interstices at the limits of the legislated city in which it has no place, where it is always “out of place”.

3 Conclusion

These preliminary remarks do not lend themselves to a definition of urban art as such other than a reappropriation of the one proposed by Nicholas Alden Riggle concerning street art: “An artwork is [urban art] if, and only if, [urban space] is internal to its meaning.” (Riggle, 2010: 246) To recognize art’s essential relation to the non-places within the city holds major implications for the artistic activity concerning the relationality of artwork and space. Only if it takes into account the latent information (be it physical, ideological, aesthetic etc.) of the place it claims will it be able to deconstruct and transform, from its non-place, the identity of any place in the city it was thought it could claim for itself. If we allow art back into the city, it is under full consciousness of the dangers Plato detected in the artists’ activity. If we accept the contradictions at the origin of the work of art without trying to get rid of them either by banishing art altogether (Plato) or by resolving them dialectically (Hegel) it can only be by allowing the monstrous into the city which is unbearable for any stable concept of the subject, identity and the city itself. Nevertheless, urban art provides the means to always re-imagine the pre-established order of the city and its inhabitants and allows for the possibility of an opening towards “other cities, other citizenships”. (Young, 2014: 48)

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