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'It's Our Art' ... But Who are 'We'?

Art's Encounter with the General Public in the Public Spaces of Multicultural Societies

Anne Ring Petersen

What purposes should art in public spaces fulfil? This is a much-debated issue that will probably always be surrounded by considerable disagreement: Should the work's presence be temporary or permanent? Should art in public spaces be critical – as Jane Rendell has proposed in several of her inspiring and insightful writings and in her talk today? Should it bring beauty and sensory pleasure into people's life and embellish our environments? Should it be provocative and make headlines in newspapers and newscasts, thus transcending its local context and reaching a large audience? Should it be a political means of facilitating social cohesion or agency among marginalised groups of citizens as some types of interventionist art aim for? Or, should it serve practical purposes at the intersection between art, design and street furniture? The answers are probably as many as there are ways for artists to solve the task of making an artwork for a public site.

Although the purpose of my paper is not to present my set of answers to these questions, I would like to begin by explaining where I stand. I believe that art in public places can serve a number of different purposes. Representing a "critical spatial practice" (cf. Rendell) is certainly an important one, but I am really not convinced that 'critique' in the traditional sense of the word, with its connotations of avant-garde radicalism and anti-establishment, is of overriding importance for making artworks or projects in public places that successfully stage the encounter between artwork and citizens in an engaging way.

When invited to speak at this conference, I was specifically asked to talk about the "public space as a stage for an encounter between the viewer and the artwork". The preliminary programme supplemented this description of the subject with the following working title of this section's theme: "Does art lose its critical potential when it fulfils the expectations of the user in public space [?]". I was rather puzzled by the wording: Who is this user or viewer in the singular? Is 'the user' synonymous with the unspecified individual of phenomenology, or with the universal spectator that Modernism dreamed up? And is the term 'user' apt for describing the character of the exchange taking place between so-called 'public art' and the residents and other people who are regular users of a particular locality, not the artwork

situated there? If we wish to articulate how users of a given locality relate to public art, I think we have to designate these users as some kind of audience. Public art is usually made for 'the general public'. The question is: how should we define 'the general public' as a target group for art in the public spaces of contemporary European societies?

To answer this question, I think it is necessary to move beyond two common lines of thinking about contemporary art, which are counterproductive to thinking about art in public spaces.

The first thing we need to get rid of is the habit of talking about 'the audience' as a unity and 'the user' in the singular when discussing art that ventures out into culturally and socially diverse and agonistic public spaces. The second one is the common type of criticism that judges and categorizes art in public spaces as being either 'critical' or 'affirmative' and associates the former with potentiality, the latter with limitations. This kind of critical dichotomisation surfaces even in writings by such distinguished experts on public art as Rosalyn Deutsche and Miwon Kwon. Kwon advocates what she calls "interruptive" radical art and considers such art practices to be socially and politically transformative. Conversely, she rejects "assimilative" and allegedly harmonising art that is complicit with the people in power and therefore presumed to be a gatekeeper of existing social systems and the status quo (Kwon 2002: 11, 170; Deutsche 1988: 13, 18-19).

Art historian and cultural theorist Irit Rogoff has introduced a useful distinction between three types of critical engagement. The first type is *criticism*, understood as a form of finding faults and exercising judgment according to a consensus of values; the second type is *critique*, understood as an analysis of underlying assumptions; and the third is *criticality*. According to Rogoff criticality operates from "an uncertain ground of actual embeddedness", i.e. from a desire to inhabit culture and to participate in culture in a relation different from the critical analysis that intends to illuminate flaws and allocate blame (Rogoff 2006: 16-17). In other words, criticality is based on an awareness of the critic's own complicity with the phenomenon under scrutiny. Thus, Rogoff does not see criticality and complicity as being opposed to each other, but rather as intertwined in each other. As I understand Rogoff's argument, entanglement in institutional, social and economic power structures and constraints does not per se exclude an artistic practice that critically interrogates the social, historical and institutional conditions of its own production. Accordingly, the concept of criticality is much more apt to describe the character of many artworks and projects in public spaces than the concept of critique, considering the restrictions and controls, the compromises and alliances imposed on artists working with art for public spaces – especially if their work is to be permanently installed.

A case in point is a monument that I came upon some months ago in Melbourne. Like so many other inner-urban harbours and riverfronts, the 'Southbank' of Melbourne has undergone a redevelopment and has been reborn as a showpiece cultural and leisure precinct (Stevens 2006: 173). As part of this redevelopment, Sandridge Bridge – a former rail bridge from 1888

– has been transformed into a pedestrian bridge connecting the leisure precinct south of the Yarra River with the central business district on the north riverbank. The transformation of the bridge into a public leisure zone featuring art was one of the key projects of the 2006 Commonwealth Games in Melbourne. The refurbishment was initiated and co-funded by the Victorian Government and the City of Melbourne. Lebanese artist Nadim Karam created an installation, *The Travellers*, that was added to the bridge, and a Melbourne businessman, Les Erdi, envisioned a representation of the history of the Australian people, which he also funded (Groher 11 June 2006).

The Travellers is a series of ten polished stainless-steel sculptures, each of them around 8m in height. The first figure, representing the Indigenous peoples of Victoria, stands on a huge basalt boulder in Queensbridge Square, marking the threshold of the bridge. The other nine figures are located on the bridge and represent different periods of immigration to Australia, ranging from the beginning of white settlement and colonisation up to present-day immigration. Traditionally immigrants arrived by train over the bridge from Sandridge, where most ships berthed. Thus, the nine sculptures are mounted on bogies. Three times a day, they move along the length of the bridge in a procession which recalls the train journey from the bridge's previous incarnation and the experience of arriving in a new country.

The Travellers are complemented by *Australian's History*, a series of 128 glass panels running the length of the bridge, separating the sculptures from the pedestrian area. Eight panels provide statistical data on indigenous peoples and languages. The remaining panels provide details on the immigrants that have migrated from more than 150 countries to become Australians. Each panel provides information on a particular country. It tells which areas the immigrants came from, during which periods they came to Australia, as well as how many people settled in Victoria and in the rest of the country. It also specifies how many Australians with for instance a Danish background were born in Denmark, and how many are descendants of immigrants.¹

I have not chosen this bridge-cum-monument in inner-city Melbourne because I find it particularly beautiful or innovative in formal terms, although it should be recognised as a rare synthesis of art and engineering, as the design of *The Travellers* was developed by using 3D modelling and scripting programmes for translating the initial artistic concept into sculptures.² Nor have I chosen it because it is critical and subversive. It has obviously been heavily supported by state, city and business sector, also in terms of content. This was actually

¹ This statistical information was provided by Dr James Jupp, author of *The Australian People: An Encyclopedia of the Nation, Its People and Their Origin*, Cambridge University Press 2001 (1988), and is based on 2001 census data.

"'Meeting Again' – Melbourne's new Sandridge Bridge precinct", *Urban Design Forum*, <http://udf.org.au/udf-quarterly/udfq-75-september-2006/article/-lsquo-meeting-again-rsquo-melbourne-rsquo-s-new-sandridge-bridge-precinct/> Accessed 17 December 2010.

² The design of the figures thus required a collaborative approach involving artist, architect, engineer and eventually steel fabricator.

made clear in a joint press release from the Minister for Planning and the Minister for Arts, in which Art Minister Mary Delahunty declared that Nadim Karam's sculptures would "lift the old iron bridge from a simple walkway to a statement about the contribution of migrants to this city and country." ("Media release, 8 May 2005) Hence, one must assume that the ideological understanding of Australians' history and cultural identity that the monument communicates to users of the bridge is officially sanctioned.³

Despite the fact that Sandridge Bridge does not represent a "critical spatial practice" that questions "dominant ideologies" (Rendell 2006: 4), it is one of the most thought-provoking art works I have encountered in a public place for many years.

It is my contention that one of the most vital questions concerning people's encounter with public art today is the question of how 'the general public' relates to it. I think identification is an important component here. A precondition for an exchange to take place is that the work is able to elicit a feeling of being included in the sphere of the work, of being addressed by it and touched by it in some way that may even be non-verbal and not consciously reflected on.

The question is pressing because the composition of 'the general public' has changed in many European countries due to increased immigration since the 1950s. I use the term 'the general public' because I lack a better term, and because I wish to distinguish it from the 'the public' – a term we often use with political and constitutional connotations to refer to "the 'members' of a public whose interest a government claims to serve" (Hannay 2005: 17). The term 'the general public' is used here as a socially and culturally inclusive designation of 'the public' as an audience consisting of all the people living in a society. As opposed to 'an audience', 'a public' is only properly so called when a transition has been made from a private to an 'open' event, that is to say, accessibility is an important parameter here (Hannay 2005: 30). Among other things, being part of the general public means entitlement to move freely in what is called public space, even though part of this space could be privatized. In general, public spaces are where you find the public, and the freedom to be there is enjoyed by anyone 'belonging' to it (Hannay 2005: 4). Art in public spaces can be one of the ties that link people together as 'a general public' that shapes an opinion.

The purpose of my paper is to consider how art can address the 'general public' as a heterogeneous and diverse public. Thus, I am not focusing on outreach-programmes and community art aimed at selected and fairly homogenous groups of people, but on artworks addressed to the daily users of public urban spaces. I would like to suggest that one of the

³As a local commentator wrote in *The White Hat Melbourne Newsletter* the year the bridge was unveiled: "[...] currently [the Sandridge Rail Bridge] represents to us a particular publicly sanctioned approach to historical preservation. In the manner of certain educational institutions and museums which are busily rewriting history to fit a prevailing ideology, the current Sandridge Bridge uses a historical structure as a platform to display certain ideologies (however laudable) that have everything to do with now and little to do with then." Quoted from, "No. 3 – The Sandridge Rail Bridge", *The White Hat Melbourne Newsletter No. 176*, 15 June 2006. Author's name is not stated. <http://www.whitehat.com.au/melbourne/Buildings/7Bridges.asp#Sandridge> Accessed 17 December 2010.

major challenges for art in the public spaces of Europe today is to find ways to articulate recognition of the cultural diversity of European populations and to address the members of these populations as citizens.

One of the classic roles of art in public spaces is to function as a monument that reflects on the self-understanding of a particular society in a way that contributes to the construction of the cultural identity of that society. Thus, the monument primarily relates to the collective identity of citizens, not the identity of the individual subject. Moreover, monuments suppose at least a partial consensus of values, because without it their narrative could not be recognised. As a result, scholars generally regard monuments as affirmative means of preserving the social 'order', not as means of changing it. In the wording of Malcolm Miles, a monument is "a device of social control less brutish and costly than armed force". Miles *does* consider the possibility that a public sculpture could counter the conventions of the monument, but only in terms of a radical art that either "subverts" conventions or constitute a negative category of "anti-monuments" (Miles 1997: 58).

How does Sandridge Bridge fit into this pattern? Does it fulfil the conventional role of a monument, described by Miles as "[...] standing for a stability which conceals the internal contradictions of society and survives the day-to-day fluctuations of history"? (Miles 1997: 58) Or, is it a subversive 'anti-monument'? I would say that it is neither one nor the other. On the one hand, it legitimises multiculturalism as an official ideology, so it cannot be an anti-monument. On the other hand, it conceals neither the social contradictions nor the fluctuations of Australian history. On the contrary, it articulates contradictions and diversity while also expressing a critical awareness of colonial power relations and the suffering inflicted on indigenous people. Moreover, the fact that a vandal used a sledgehammer to smash nearly a third of the glass panels in 2007 indicates that some people consider this tribute to immigrants a provocation.

The fact that I find Sandridge Bridge challenging has to do with this ability to defy doctrinaire categorization. But there are also other reasons for my fascination.

One of them is *scale* – the scale of architecture and engineering rather than the more intimate scale of art – an impressive scale that connotes importance. A second reason is the very intriguing way the monument positions itself at the intersections between historical archive, installation art and cultural heritage monument. In this context, the statistical approach to immigration in *Australian's History* seems to carry a particular significance, fighting the ghosts of misinformation and mythmaking by taking a factual approach to Australia's history of immigration.

What is more, as a public monument it situates itself in the midst of a riverfront leisure precinct. The nearby casino, shops, restaurants and concert hall address people as customers, whereas the monument addresses people as citizens and members of 'a public'. It does so, not by screening itself off from the leisure industries, but by profiting from this environment as a

spectacular and socially inclusive stage for the public's encounter with the monument. According to urban designer Quentin Stevens, urban leisure precincts are places of reduced social stratification, where high and low sources of entertainment mix. As a result, they often create a socially inclusive environment, "a place where different people and activities can come together and mix" (Stevens 2006: 177). Sandridge Bridge is itself such a place of spectacle and mixing, a stage that offers opportunities for seeing and being seen. Moreover, Sandridge Bridge profits from the fact that people go to leisure precincts when they have 'free time' to spend – also on stopping and thinking about an artwork that they pass by accidentally.

Finally, the fascination also has to do with the individual 'user': me – a historically and culturally specific individual, a visitor from a faraway country with a short, but agonistic history of pronounced cultural diversity and no national tradition for celebrating it; a small European nation state founded on relative ethnic homogeneity as opposed to Australia as a nation state founded on immigration and colonialism.

As a city created by immigrants, Melbourne prides itself of its multiculturalism. Sandridge Bridge is intended to express this pride, monumentally and collectively: Or, as it is stated in "The Travellers Factsheet" on the homepage of the City of Melbourne, the intention is "to publicly record and celebrate the origins, growth and diversity of modern Victoria" (unknown, c. 2006). My experience of the work as a civic monument that celebrates immigration and multiculturalism as a resource was put into perspective on my return to Denmark in late November 2010 when I got the news of the latest government policy: the Danish government had proposed a new point system to limit immigration of partners and spouses more efficiently; and the Minister for Health, Bertel Haarder, had declared that patients could use their right to choose hospital freely to avoid staff wearing a Muslim scarf.

I can only think of two Danish equivalents to Sandridge Bridge, both of them much smaller works, whose 'voices' are speaking from the margin instead of the political centre: The first one is Superflex' interventionist poster *Foreigners, please don't leave us alone with the Danes!* from 2002. It was occasioned by an exhibition of art in Vollsmose, a multicultural residential area outside the city of Odense, which is usually demonised by the media as a ghetto. Superflex used the event for a more far-reaching political manifestation by putting up posters not only in Vollsmose, but also in Copenhagen, Malmö and Linz, where they were also working at that time.

My second local example is sculptor Bjørn Nørgaard's *The Heart of Nørrebro* from 2010. It is a site-specific monument for the multicultural quarter of Nørrebro in Copenhagen. It is shaped like an obelisk with the inscription "We Want to Live Here Together" written in several languages and crowned by a red heart of compressed weapons confiscated by the police in connection with a safe-conduct campaign in 2008-2009.

Sandridge Bridge speaks with the institutional voice of an official monument that declares that Australian cultural identity can include all national origins. Judging from the many pedestrians that slow down or stop to read the text of particular panels of *Australian's History*, it communicates its national narrative in an engaging way.

'Superflex' poster speaks from a complex inside/outside position in relation to Danish society. It constructs a double perspective, speaking as insider and outsider at one and the same time, thus construction a marginal position similar to the position of many immigrants betwixt and between Danish citizenship and the status of 'a foreigner'. Speaking from this 'third space' the poster becomes a declaration of solidarity: foreigners please stay!

Bjørn Nørgaard's sculpture gives voice to a general sentiment among the inhabitants of Nørrebro. For several years they have witnessed a bloody war among criminal biker gangs and gangs of immigrant youngsters. *The Heart of Nørrebro* seeks social reconciliation in a way that makes Herbert Marcuse's frequently cited critique of 'affirmative' art seem slightly outmoded. Marcuse argued that art in the bourgeois period offers semblance of reconciliation, but displaces the hope for freedom to an aesthetic dimension where it does not interrupt the conditions of social, economic or political life (Miles 2009: 33). Nørgaard does not need to make an aggressively interruptive sculpture to bring the social and cultural ruptures of Nørrebro to the surface. When acting as 'the voice of the community' calling for reconciliation among its members, Nørgaard's sculpture *also* points to the severe problems that makes such reconciliation necessary.

These three very different artworks have something in common: They all grapple with the problem of how to address 'the general public' as a heterogeneous and diverse public. They solve this problem by speaking from very different positions of enunciation, but they all try to address their audience, not as mere spectators or private individuals, but rather as 'a public'. One could consider whether they represent not only instances of art in public places, but also instances of what Miwon Kwon has called "art in the public interest." (Kwon 2002: 60). Given, on the one hand, the homogenisation of mass media, and on the other, the balkanisation of identity politics, such attempts to create a public sphere, where one can imagine a collective identification that is not based on consensus or sameness, are pertinent responses to the question of how art should engage users of public places today.

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