

PUBLIC ART AND THE SPACE

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Abstract: The rapid development of the big European cities in the XXth century and the change of the traditional city into a metropolis gave birth not only to an extraordinary dynamic artistic culture but also to a culture of interpreting, dedicated to the study and explanation of these urban phenomena and their social effects. The aim of this paper is to build a bridge between various practices of contemporary art as they can be found in public art (to be more specific: site-specific art, as we will see) and a series of disciplines dealing with the studying of urban space: urban sociology, human geography and the anthropology of the everyday, all inspired by critical theories of culture and society. From this point on, we will be able to meditate upon public art's role in the urban public space.

Key words: Richard Serra, site-specific art, public space, space, place

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In the night of 15 to 16 March 1989, after a process that generated an intense media interest and extended over a period of four years, a sculpture named *Tilted Arc* was disassembled. It was created by the American artist Richard Serra and placed in Federal Plaza, the administrative centre of New York. The disassembling of the sculpture was made, as Caroline Levine¹ underlines, in the well-known spirit of the American democracy; a referendum on a matter of taste revealed the right of the public not to like it. The funds for assembling the work came from a government office who initiated a programme called Art-in-Architecture in the 1970s; the programme was meant to offer financial support for artists to create works of art for the new federal buildings all along the States. Serra's project was considered fascinating enough to „capture the energy, enterprise, and the fast movement of city's inhabitants”². After a detailed study of the context meant to bring the statue to life, the artist proposed a work of art which would raise the passersby's attention to the way in which it moves in space. The sculpture crossed the plaza and was formed by a curved wall of red steel, unfinished, 36 metres long and 3.6 metres high. In March 1985, on account of numerous letters of discontent (around 45.000), a new committee organized a 3 days' public debate where more than 180 spoke, from employees in the nearby buildings to artists, art critics, curators and politicians. As a result, the committee voted for the relocation of the work which lays now, disassembled in a scrap iron warehouse.

¹ Caroline Levine, „The paradox of public art: democratic space, the avant-garde, and Richard Serra's "Tilted Arc"”, in *Philosophy & Geography*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2002, p. 54

² Clara Weyergraf-Serra and Martha Buskirk (eds.), *The destruction of Tilted Arc: Documents*, MIT Press, 1991, p. 83 (This volume includes part of the paper work gathered along the trial, pro and against depositions, testimonies of specialists, as well as Richard Serra's depositions)

They considered that the interest of the public working or living in the area surrounding the plaza carries a much more legal weight than that of an artist or the professional world of art. Finally, the conflict between the two types of public – the world of art and the common people using the plaza – was settled in favour of the latter.



Figure 1. Richard Serra, *Tilted Arc*, Federal Plaza, New York, 1981-1989

In order to understand Serra's artistic gesture, first we must try to circumscribe him to the artistic context he belongs to. The dominant paradigm in the first half of the XXth century, with important echoes in the second half as well, was modernism. Modernist art and aesthetic theory focused mainly on the subjective aesthetic experience. The autonomous individual, glorified in the person of the artist and in the created object, equally transcends both „life” and the public.,, What quality – art critic Clive Bell asked in 1914 – is shared by all objects that provoke our aesthetic emotions? ... significant form ... lines and colours combined in a particular way, certain forms and relations of forms, stir our aesthetic emotions. (...) For, to appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas, no familiarity with its emotions.”³ The idea of the autonomy of art was definitely one of the most important axioms of modern aesthetics, if not its central principle. This idea became the brand of a new way of aesthetic experience, distinct from the practical, moral, cognitive and religious ways. The essence of this doctrine, expressed in common terms, consists in the idea that art does not have religious, moral, cognitive, social or any other extra aesthetic purposes. Its only reason to exist is to be beautiful, well-structured and well-written. Art „teaches” us absolutely nothing on life. Hence art evolves exclusively on its own basics; art does not affect nor reflect the social, historical or biographical circumstances of its creation. Art is, therefore, *something* (a composite of images, colours, words; a system of signs, pure fiction, etc.), and the real world is *something else*. If with modernism, imagination and artistic experience were tamed by the restrictions of separating art from life, starting with the 60s, art will try different ways to get out of the isolation where the refusal of dialogue with life pushed it and to rediscover with increasing voluptuousness the dimensions of the concrete reality. Serra's artistic creation must be understood within the context of this rapprochement towards everyday life; the same applies to public art and, more exactly, site-specific art. As a matter of fact, one of the most

³ Clive Bell, „The Aesthetic Hypothesis”, in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds.), *Art in Theory. 1900-1990. An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Blackwell, Oxford UK, 1999, pp. 113, 115

common disapprovals regarding *Tilted Arc* was that the artist had not understood the new artistic context, his work being modernist and defined mostly by its social dimension and not by the aesthetic one. Serra might have not understood the fact that making public art means appreciating and anticipating the social impact of the work; the location for such a work of art is never purely physical and aesthetic but first political. A fact to remark is that the American artist repeatedly rejects this criticism which, he thinks, could be valid in the case of a modernist artistic creation. Serra shows deep interest in the way his works interact both with the location and the viewers.

Art came up against an extreme difficulty when it decided to come down in the public space. Hilde Hein remarks that as long as we stay within the modernist paradigm, public art cannot be but an oxymoron⁴; modernism aestheticises the artistic objects, thus creating another world, parallel to the real one. It is also clear that through the mere „coming down” in public space, the objects of contemporary art do not become public art. Initially, in the 60-70s, public art was dominated by sculptures following the tradition of modernist abstractionism, mostly replicas at large scale of works exhibited in museums; these works were totally indifferent to the space they were located in. The stated purpose of this kind of public art was to contribute to the aesthetic regeneration of the city, to become an antidote to the functionalist style of modernist architecture. This claim, however, proved to be unrealistic for the simple fact that the values of contemporary art were independent of the everyday problems of urban life. The works of art inevitably came to confront themselves with an extremely heterogenous public which, in most cases, had no contact with art in museums or galleries. Therefore, beginning with the 1970s, public art refuses the status of aesthetic autonomy and programmatically aims at a real dialogue with architecture and space. Public art thus becomes (at least at the level of intention) a form of life on the street, a way of articulating the implicit values of the city or of the particular place held by the work of art. Site-specific art must be understood in the context of this idea, that place has an essential role in art’s aesthetic, social and cultural set up and, hence the need to create an art inextricably related to a specific place.

Serra’s intention is, as we shall try to motivate as follows, to transform the *space* of the plaza into a *place*. A very good description of this space, as it looked before Serra’s artistic intervention, is offered by art critic Douglas Crimp: „*Tilted Arc* was built on a site that is public in a very particular sense. It inhabited a plaza flanked by a government office building housing federal bureaucracies and by the United States Court of International Trade. The plaza adjoins Foley Square, the location of New York City’s federal and state courthouses. *Tilted Arc* was thus situated in the very center of the mechanisms of state power. The Jacob K. Javits Federal Building and its plaza are nightmares of urban development, official, anonymous, overscaled, inhuman. The plaza is a bleak, empty area, whose sole function is to shuttle human traffic in and out of the buildings. Located at one corner of the plaza is a fountain that cannot be used, since the wind-tunnel effect of the huge office bloc would drench the entire plaza with water.”⁵ Serra himself considered the plaza a sterile, anonymous place, remarkable only by its insignificance. What is a place and what is the difference between space and place? An answer to this question is given by human geography. „What is a place? What gives a place its identity, its aura?”⁶ Yi-Fu Tuan asked the same question in *Space and Place. The Perspective of Experience*, a book who opened unexpected, new horizons to human geography. He proposes an „attempt to systematize human experience of space and place”⁷. The most important contribution brought by this book to human geography (and not only) consists in „the distinction between an abstract realm of space and an experienced and felt world of place”⁸. Places are centres of human significance and experience,

⁴ Hilde Hein, „What is Public Art? Time, Place, and Meaning”, in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 54:1, Winter 1996, p. 1

⁵ Douglas Crimp, „Redefining Site Specificity”, in Hal Foster, Gordon Hughes (eds.), *Richard Serra*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2000, p. 167

⁶ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place. The Perspective of Experience*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1977, p.4

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 200

⁸ Tim Cresswell, “Space and Place (1977): Yi-Fu Tuan”, in Phill Hubbard, Rob Kitichin and Gill Valentine (eds.), *Key Texts in Human Geography*, Sage, Los Angeles, 2008, p. 55

they are special ensembles, with a history and meaning, incarnating the experiences and aspirations of people. The place is thus humanized space, it is the immediate ambient of my body. Writing about the transforming of space into place, Yi-Fu Tuan underlines the importance of involving all the senses, not just the sight; the kinesthetic familiarization is essential in this process. Therefore, „the feel of a place ... is a unique blend of sights, sounds, and smells, a unique harmony of natural and artificial rhythms, such as times of sunrise and sunset, of work and play. The feel of place is registered in one's muscles and bones.”⁹ This is exactly the kind of experience Serra speaks about when declaring in front of the committee during the case opened against his work: „My sculptures are not meant for a viewer to stop, look, and stare at. The historical concept of placing a sculpture on a pedestal was to establish a separation between the sculpture and the viewer. I am interested in a behavioral space in which the viewer interacts with the sculpture in its context.”¹⁰ It is clear the fact that the main purpose of the sculpture was not to draw attention on itself but on its context/place and the viewer found in that context/place. What Serra wanted was, therefore, to confer the space of the plaza a new perception, offering it something that was missing: personality. For most of us the city is „invisible”. The streets, the buildings, even the monuments are nothing but a monotonous background in our everyday life, spaces where our bodies pass by following their way. *Tilted Arc* was conceived to initiate a dialogue with the public. Placed right in the way of the pedestrians who are indifferent to modern art, it cannot be avoided; it calls attention by its own presence. The passerby is forced to notice it; he becomes aware of its presence and, to the same extent, he becomes aware of himself and his movements inside the space created by the sculpture. Step by step, the perception of the sculpture and its space is changing. Or, as Yi-Fu Tuan would say, it becomes human, turning into a place.

Yet, place is more. This is the conclusion reached by those (geographers, sociologists, anthropologists) who will continue the research started by Yi-Fu Tuan. The French sociologist Lucien Lefebvre¹¹ introduced, as early as 1974, a notion of space understood as social product, significant and lived; geographer Edward Soja will distinguish, from an assumed postmodernist perspective, a third type of space („Thirdspace”) besides the two assumed by geography till then. Geography was dominated, Soja says, by a dual thinking of the space: „one, which I have described as a Firstspace perspective and epistemology, fixed mainly on the concrete materiality of spatial forms, on things that can be empirically mapped; and the second, as Secondspace, conceived as ideas about space in thoughtful re-presentations of human spatiality in mental or cognitive forms”¹². Unlike these two forms of space, „the Thirdspace”, which is a „Lived space”, embodies the real and imagined life world of experiences, emotions, events, and political choices. As Soja describes it, this space is „directly lived”, the space of „inhabitants” and „users”, containing all other real and imagined spaces simultaneously. Lucy Lippards takes one step forward, leaving from the premise that space is not an „empty box” where social interactions occur, but rather an ideological product. She proposes a holistic vision of the place, understood as a type of text of human culture, „the intersection of nature, culture, and ideology” that is such understood as such from the position of being an „insider”. Place is, according to Lippard, „a portion of land/town/cityscape seen from the inside, the resonance of a specific location that is known and familiar ... the external world mediated through human subjective experience.”¹³

Returning now to Serra's *Tilted Arc*, the artist underlined in all his interventions that the site-specificity of his sculpture was equally determined by social and material conditions as well as by aesthetic exigences of the plaza's space. His sculpture functions like a mediator between the physical and architectural components of this space and those sociopolitical. The resulted dialogue between work and place aims at revealing the physicality of the place and at intensifying the

⁹ Yi-Fu Tuan, *op.cit.*, pp. 183-184

¹⁰ Clara Weyergraf-Serra and Martha Buskirk (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 65

¹¹ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 1991

¹² Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace. Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*, Blackwell Publishers, 1996, p. 10

¹³ Lucy Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society*, New York Press, New York, 1997, p. 7

consciousness of the fundamental relation between self and place. Yet, an important nuance appears here. Serra's sculpture has one more purpose: the critical transformation of the physical and institutional context of the place. Serra wanted the sculpture to redefine space in its own terms, not to let itself defined by the space of the square. The aim of *Tilted Arc*, as well as the aim of Serra's entire late creation, was to make a „critical adjustment” of space. He declares the following in an interview: „I've found a way to dislocate or alter the decorative function of the plaza and actively bring people into the sculpture's context. (...) The intention is to bring the viewer into the sculpture. The placement of the sculpture will change the space of the plaza. After the piece is created, the space will be understood primarily as a function of the sculpture.”¹⁴ Serra was convinced that art has to be oppositional in order to maintain its integrity: „It's really the obligation of the sculptor to define sculpture, not to be defined by the power structure that asks you, that while you put your sculpture up, to please make this place more beautiful. I find that a totally false notion, because their notion of beauty and my notion of . . . sculpture are always, invariably, at opposite ends.”¹⁵

A successful art object, Serra seems to say, would be that which, one way or another, succeeds in interrupting ordinary life or, as in the case of *Tilted Arc*, addresses a challenge to the way human beings use space. Douglas Crimp notices that sculpture „engaged the passerby in an entirely new kind of spatial experience that was counterposed against the bland efficiency established by the plaza's architects”¹⁶. *Tilted Arc* imposes the assuming of a different route on hurried passersby crossing the plaza. Crimp thus underlines that Serra changes the purpose of the plaza from that of a purely utilitarian space to one of sculpture: „In reorienting the use of Federal Plaza from a place of traffic control to one of sculpture, Serra once again used sculpture to hold its site hostage, to insist upon the necessity for art to fulfill its own functions rather than those relegated to it by its governing institutions and discourses.”¹⁷ Thus, Serra explicitly underlines that he is not interested in „art as assertion or manifestation of complicity”¹⁸. He is deeply interested in those to whom his art addresses, yet only to the extent in which he can count on their potential transformation. That is why *Tilted Arc* questions the sociopolitical conditions of space, rather than carry a function of improving them. Serra is convinced that the development and rapid change of capitalism brought to a leveling of distinctions between local differences and cultures, that local particularities continuously homogenize. This process exacerbates the conditions of alienation and disappearance of place in contemporary life. Site-specific art has therefore the mission to engage in a process of remaking the old differences or, rather creating new ones; a process of re-creating some places by attributing significance and identity to this undistinguished space.

A very successful study written by French anthropologist Marc Augé, has generated a great number of debates lately; the topic is the relation between space and place in the context of our „supermodern” society. Supermodernity is characterized, Augé claims, by the change in our concepts of time, space and individual. He uses the expression „anthropological places” to describe places characterized by identity, relationship and history. These places bear a significance for those „living” inside it and they are intelligible for those observing them. The hypothesis issued by Augé is that supermodernity produces „non-places”, meaning spaces which are not anthropological: „If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, than a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place.”¹⁹ Supermodernity subjects the individual consciousness to a completely new experience, directly related to the emergence and spread of non-places. The non-place is a

¹⁴ Apud Harriet F. Senie, *The Tilted Arc Controversy. Dangerous Precedent?*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2002, p. 24

¹⁵ Apud *Ibidem*, p. 24

¹⁶ Douglas Crimp, *op. cit.*, p. 168

¹⁷ *Ibidem*

¹⁸ Richard Serra, „from the Yale Lecture 1990”, in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 1126

¹⁹ Marc Augé, *Non-Places. Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, Verso, London, 1995, pp. 77-78

fragment of urban space, of strictly utilitarian public space, depersonalized, emotionally empty, without any identity or history. They are spaces formed in relation with certain ends (transport, transit, commerce, leisure), transit spaces (highways, passages, stations, airports, subway stations, squares etc.) where, from the moment he got in, the individual is „relieved of his usual determinants. He becomes no more than what he does or experiences in the role of passenger, customer or driver. (...) ... he tastes for a while – like anyone who is possessed – the passive joys of identity-loss, and the more active pleasure of role-playing. (...) The space of non-place creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude, and similitude.”²⁰ There is no place safe from changing into a non-place, the French anthropologist warns.

At this moment we can better understand Serra’s art, as well as – why not? – its public sanctioning. When conceiving *Tilted Arc*, Serra seems to have sensed that place is a socially, culturally and politically built category, under the influence of some particular historical determinations and implications. *Tilted Arc* reveals the alienation of contemporary urban life, it „no longer seeks to be a noun/object but a verb/process, provoking the viewers’ *critical* (not just physical) acuity regarding the ideological conditions of their viewing.”²¹ Public art’s role appears to be, in this context, a form of resistance before the cultural symptoms of contemporary capitalism, embodied in the collapse of spatial experience, both in the perceptual and cognitive register. Since cities/urban spaces become more and more alike, larger and larger slices being transformed in the “non-places” Marc Augé was writing about, Serra’s sculpture, far from being elitist or nostalgic, appears, with the assumed risk of disturbing and irritating, like an attempt of humanizing space.

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²⁰ *Ibidem*, p.103

²¹ Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another. Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, 2002, p. 24