



The Intriguing Traits of Contemporary Public Art

令人魅惑的當代公共藝術特徵

Shuai-Ping Ku (辜率品)*

Abstract

This paper picks up some essential traits on the topic of contemporary public art, which has intimate connection with our living environment and cultural representation. In addition to uplifting our living condition and satisfy our spiritual need, public art plays important role in the transformation of our physical environment and tempo-spatial perception. Recently, our cities pay much attention in promoting public art and supporting various activities in educating people about the public art and its connection to our everyday life. The author selects some specific traits – controversy, monumentality, temporality, democracy and improvisation – which might be considered essential and uses these traits to review and evaluate some of the general issues and experiences of contemporary public art. Without interview and questionnaire, this paper is a preliminary study in terms of the critical viewpoints that might help general public to approach the core of contemporary public art easily and quickly.

Keywords: Public Art, Controversy, Monumentality, Temporality, Democracy, Improvisation

摘要

這篇文章探討某些當代公共藝術的特徵，它們和我們的文化呈現與生活環境有密切的關聯。除了提高我們的生活環境和滿足精神需要，對於我們的實質環境和時空概念的轉型上，公共藝術也扮演一個重要的角色。最近，我們的城市透過提倡公共藝術和支持不同的教育活動，向民眾宣導公共藝術的本質，及公共藝術與日常生活的關連性。作者選擇某些一般大眾認為重要的當代公共藝術特徵-爭議性、紀念性、暫時性、民主性、即興性-並且用它們來檢視和評價某些特定當代公共藝術的議題和經驗。沒有訪談和問卷，這篇文章是根基於批判性觀點的前置性探討，它可用來幫助一般大眾簡單迅速的趨近公共藝術的本質。

關鍵字: 公共藝術、爭議性、紀念性、暫時性、民主性、即興性

* Assistant Professor, Department of Architecture and Landscape, Nanhua University, Taiwan.

南華大學 建景系助理教授



1. Controversy

In 1981, artist Richard Serra set the sculpture Tilted Arc, in Federal Plaza in New York City. It was commissioned by the Arts-in-Architecture program of the U.S. General Services Administration. Tilted Arc was a curved wall of Cor-Ten steel, 120 feet long and 12 feet high, which cut the Federal Plaza in half. People working in nearby areas must get around its huge body as they pass the plaza. After the sculpture generating controversy, Judge Edward Re began a campaign to have it removed. Four years later, William Diamond, regional administrator for the GSA, decided to hold a public hearing to determine its fate. Richard Serra testified that the sculpture was site-specific, and that to remove it from its site is to destroy it. During the public hearing in March 1985, 122 people testified in favor of retaining the sculpture, and 58 testified in favor of removing it. The jury voted 4-1 in favor of removing the sculpture. On March 15, 1989, Tilted Arc was cut into three pieces and removed from Federal Plaza. The Tilted Arc decision raised general questions about public arts in the U.S. and abroad. The role of public funding, the artist's rights, the public's viewpoints, and how to judge public were all vigorously debated. The Tilted Arc case was about art, law and censorship. Richard Serra wrote an article entitled "Art and Censorship" to look into the details and related law issue about this case. (Mitchell, 1993: 226-233) In the article, he pointed out that the government considered the Tilted Arc was its property after paying full payment for it. Therefore the government had the owner's right to possess, use and dispose of it. The right to property superseded all other rights: the right to freedom of speech, the right to freedom of expression, the right to protection of one's creative work.

Richard Serra also argued that his case was like all First Amendment cases. It was about curtailing free speech based on dislike of the content. In the article, Richard Serra quoted art critic Hilton Kramer's statement:

What proved to be so bitterly offensive to the community that Tilted Arc was commissioned to serve was its total lack of amenity.... the sculpture dominated with an arrogant disregard for the mental well-being and physical convenience of the people who were obliged to come into contact with the work in the course of their daily employment. (Kramer, 1989)

He further argued that Tilted Arc was not destroyed because the sculpture was uncivil but because the government wanted to set a precedent in which it could demonstrate its right to censor. (Mitchell, 1993: 230) In the final section of the article, he quoted constitutional lawyer Floyd Abrams words to articulate his point:

"While Congress is legally entitled to withdraw endowment funding, the First Amendment does not allow Congress to pick and choose who gets money and who doesn't. You can not punish people who don't adhere to Congress's version of art they like. Even if they want to protect the public, the basic legal reality is that funding may not exclude constitutionally protected speech." (Glueck, 1989)



Richard Serra particularly pointed out that the taxpayers' dollars ought to support all forms of expression as guaranteed by the First Amendment. Moreover, this article mentioned a bill called the Visual Artists Rights Act introduced by Senator Edward Kennedy. The bill attempted to amend federal copyright laws to incorporate some aspects of international moral rights protection. The bill would prohibit the intentional distortion, mutilation, or destruction of works of art after they had been sold, thus improving the copyright laws, which often treated art as a mere commercial product, by adding moral rights in addition to the basic economic protection.

The Tilted Arc case is a milestone in the history of public art. It deserves much attention in terms of its striking controversy. The controversy makes us to think about art's freedom and autonomy, and the contextual issue which concerns the art's relationship with the people, the community and the site. Richard Serra is considered a minimalist artist, whose art is part of the conceptualization of culture, space and the city. (Miles, 1997:89-90) In the Tilted Arc case, the public art system works in a political arena and is subjected to various non-art issues. The matter of local control, the role of the media, and the changing of public perception all contribute to the dismantling of the art work.

Some people argue that had the Serra "Hearing" been held as an open discussion at the time of the commission, things might have gone differently. Others state that if we can't place a work of art in an understandable context, we are emotional and intellectually threatened. In a museum or gallery setting, the threatening quality of Serra's work is often considered as powerful. In a public space, it is often interpreted as hostile. Many times we see the public result in helpless and hostile by art that don't or can't understand. The removal of Tilted Arc may be considered against the democracy as well as the public art process. In Harriet Senie's article, the author argues that the art work such as Tilted Arc would be benefited by the community input, thoughtful educational program, adding public amenities at the site and the ultimate right of due process. (Senie, 1989:298-302) However, it could be possible that the process to cope with controversy is part of the way to understanding public art projects.

2. Monumentality

The role of monument has been considered important in maintaining the social order, but the idea is under tremendous transformation. The implementation and the representation of the public work for this purpose also face new challenge and reevaluation. Monument is about values. Many nineteenth century monuments concern the message of empire and patriarchy. Contemporary monuments may concern national cultural identity, such as the Sydney Opera House, or the representation of specific place, such as many democratic-processing public arts.

After discussing the controversy issue in Tilted Arc case, this section will use Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial as a catalyst to explore the monumentality issue. The VVM, of 1982, consists of a Shallow V-shaped cut into the green of the Mall. One end directs to the Washington Monument and the other to the Lincoln Memorial.



58,000 Americans dead or missing in action between 1959 and 1975 are inscribed on its polished black stone. People may call the VVM a public art, architecture or a monument, but it is the interrogating role which makes it so essential. (Miles, 1997:81-83) In other words, the VVM raises the question about the power structure of the society which wages the war. Accompanying the interrogating role, the VVM could be therapeutic. This purpose might be hinted by one of the rules which guide the design competition, that is, the monument makes no overt political statement. The general people want a monument that would heal the veterans as well as the rest of the citizens, rather than worsen old wounds and invoke old passions. (Mitchell, 1993:109-110)

In terms of VVM's artistic merit, D.S. Friedman quotes the related idea of eighteenth-century French theorist and revolutionary architect Etienne-Louis Boullée (1728-1799):

An idea, as new as it was daring, came to me.... I would create buildings that gave the illusion of being buried....As I considered the problem, I realized that only low and sunken lines would be appropriate. After pondering on the rule that the first element of architecture is a wall totally bare and unadorned, I decided that my sunken architecture would be exemplified in a building that was satisfactory as a whole yet gave the appearance that part of it was below ground. (Friedman, 1995:64)

This interesting quotation is an intelligent statement on sunken monument. As for Maya Lin, she describes the origin of the design in an essay entitled "Making the Memorial":

I imagined taking a knife and cutting into the earth, opening it up, an initial violence and pain that in time would heal. The grass would grow back, but the initial cut would remain a pure, flat surface in the earth with a polished, mirrored surface... It would be an interface, between our world and the quieter, darker, more peaceful world beyond. (Lin, 2000:33-35)

The critics of the memorial sometimes point out its abstraction disconnecting from human experience, for many people neither recognize the abstract form nor try to understand the abstraction. There is another question about how to remember those killed in the war. Lin answers this by listing of the names, thus the names become essential for the design. People often come tracing the names and bring them home as evidence of and interface with the deceased family members.

The reflection of the names and the dead on the polished black stone give meaning to the memorial. The reflection of Lincoln Memorial and Washington Monument give meaning about the spirit of the America to the public. Some critics have commented on the memorial's relationship to the Lincoln Memorial and Washington monument, Philosopher Charles Griswold states that Lin's design points to the two earlier monuments:

One's reading of the VVM... is interrupted halfway through by the sight of the two other symbols...on a bright day one also sees...along with one's reflection." (Mitchell, 1993:102-103)



The argument here is that the Lin's design invites us to think of the inscribed names with our memory of Lincoln and Washington while walking along the memorial wall. This could be the way of monumentality that Lin's memorial wants us to feel and appreciate.

The interaction and participation of the visitors with the memorial wall is another trait of this new kind of memorial. The visitors not only walk along the polished granite black wall, but they also meditate, perform various activities and communicate with the deceased. The VVM becomes a platform and theater which invites all kinds of visitors to gather here, to act a ritual with the connection with all human beings.

In short, this section is about the monumentality, and VVM represents a new species of monumental design, which picks up reflections of historical memorial such as Lincoln Memorial and Washington monument, employs abstract object such as stone wall inscribing names of the deceased, and encourages participating, communicating and acting. After reviewing the VVM, the core issue of this section, the monumentality in public art, should be appreciated in a more inspiring way.

According to Malcolm Miles, both the monument and public art define the value of the public realm:

A mediation of history from the position of power is embodied in the monument, whilst the public art is no less affirmative of given values or tastes. (Miles, 1997:61)

He adds that "the expansion in the commissioning of the monuments in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries...is a statement of national identities...The allegorical figures representing the Four Continents designed by Daniel Chester French and completed in 1907, on the neo-classical US Custom House at Bowling Green, New York, are geography translated into female figures which signify cultural and political attitudes." (Ibid., 63) Miles also quotes Willett's and states that the language of allegory begins in 1789 with representation of Reason. He continues to state that the Statue of Liberty belongs to the same allegorical figure and further represents liberty, democracy and western civilization. (Ibid.,73) There are public arts concerns cultural identities such as Statue of Liberty and Eiffel Tower. Other public arts concern art, local history and community participation to commemorate a nostalgic past. Furthermore, there are public arts challenging the classic language of allegory and demanding the democratization of the monument. This new form of public art began in nineteenth century with Rodin's *The Thinker* as one of its harbingers. (Ibid., 76)

The purpose of this preliminary listing of public arts before the VVM is only a testing effort to point out VVM's critical role in the history of public art. Nevertheless, it provides a foundation in understanding the evolution of the concept of monumentality.



3. Temporality

The late twentieth century has put the issues of time, change and value into a big question mark. It is an accelerated era in which the duration has become quixotic as time itself. What is desired and depended on with some certainty is often no longer expressed by the same images. (Phillips, 1989:331) Patricia Phillips quotes Richard Sennett and states that the private is a human condition, but the public is invented and re-created by each generation. The idea of public is mutable and flexible through generations. According to Phillips:

one way that artist and agencies can continue to generate public art...is to support more short-lived experiments in which variables can be changed and results intelligently and sensitively examined....This proposal is offered not as an indictment of or indifference to permanent public art, but rather as an endorsement of alternatives. (Ibid., 332)

The Temporality in public art may be recognized from the Barcelona Pavilion designed by architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. The building was built at Barcelona, Spain, during 1928-1929, demolished in 1930. Although it is ephemeral, it conveys some of the most essential messages of the modern international-style architecture. The building shows specific qualities of flexibility and adaptability. It is responsive and timely. Many of the contemporary architects are influenced by its various qualities. The building offers no historical traits. It provides experimental sample for the present and the future. From this public work, whether it is art or architecture, we sense the temporality is about intensification and enrichment of the concept of art and public. The pavilion's is formed by separated panels with temporary value, and this adaptability and ambiguity also provide the richness for public art. The Barcelona Pavilion is a realized concept of the public art which inspires change.

Owing to fast changing of political agenda, social condition and public perception in contemporary society, the temporality of public art could help addressing its context, such as a site, open space or public square, in much specific manner, and taking into account the users, the locations and the opportunities.

We are the public; the public is you and I with differing tastes and interests. To make art to please everyone is not only impossible but undesirable. Artist Andrea Blum argues that:

If... we regard the function of public art as a voice, a point of view, one of many possibilities, then the interface in a public space will be one of information rather than of social work. (Blum, 1989:336)

This argument roughly echoes Phillips's statement about the temporality of public art, because our viewpoints and related information change fast in contemporary world, thus the result of the public art should change accordingly. The temporality of the public art also is suggested by Patricia Johanson in the same article. She states:

Since the most critical issue in the years ahead is the preservation of life on earth, design should be approached for its ability to be life-supporting, rather than as an expression



of the artist's angst, the pursuit of ideal relationships, a pilfering of art-historical styles, or a quest for the new...

Anthropocentric design_ Leonardo's man as the measure of all things_ should be discarded in favor of a model that stresses interconnections and transformation... If shopping malls can be designed to make us buy even when we do not want to, then public landscapes can probably be designed to create feeling of empathy and understanding. (Johanson, 1989:337-338)

The artist wants us to making new places available to the public, instead of annihilating everything and then decorating it with "art." The elongated quotation from the artist's article is aimed at the specific viewpoints about the discarding of artist's ego on expressing, pursuing and anticipating. The artist's ego is common to most of the artists, and the idea of discarding them and replace them with empathy and understanding is a kind of transformation of the artist's mindset. Moreover, the emphasis on transformation has a strong hint on art's ephemeral and temporary character.

Finally, this section's purpose is to point out public art's ephemeral quality, which results from our fast-changing world and plays an important role in forming the author's conception and the viewer's perception.

4. Democracy

This factor is about the ever-changing meaning of the public and the participation of the public in public art. One of the most notable artists who concern democratic reality and political agitation is Krzysztof Wodiczko. In the article entitled "Public Art and the Spaces of Democracy," (Lee, 1998:83-84) Pamela Lee mentions Deutsche's forceful argument with public art, and the controversial role the Wodiczko plays on this topic. The main argument on this article is that so-called public art is compromised by the most private of interests, and sometimes the process of redevelopment represents the worst case. The Wodiczko's public art work, Homeless Vehicle Project of 1987-88, is used to exemplify the insightful public art which reflects this kind of controversial issue. The Homeless Vehicle Project is a proposal for a personal "vehicle" to be used by homeless people struggling along the city streets. Wodiczko's prototype of homeless vehicle is able to provide some shelter and mobility for the homeless people. The vehicle is designed to accommodate daily activities of the homeless: collecting, storing, trafficking, eating, sleeping, and washing. The controversial quality of Wodiczko's works challenges the democratic concern of the urban environment. Wodiczko's slides of the Homeless Vehicle Project also depict homeless people in powerless and miserable aura. Walking along the urban spaces, these people seem to be invisible. The projecting slides are showed in a transitory manner, which is similar to the existing of these homeless people. The Wodiczko's works challenge the democratic essence of public space and public art. Even the meaning of democracy is under close examination. For many political philosophies, conflict and opposition are not unusual for democratic public spaces. Therefore public art is also filled with conflict and opposition. For the public art's contribution toward democracy, we might point



out some directions such as: public art's function in community building, public art as social representation, and public art's role in forming the public agenda. (Miles, 1997:169)

Other issues about democracy in public art may be found in previous sections. In "Controversy" section, the "Tilted Arc" case showed very important democratic argument while Richard Serra searching a law suit against the government concerning the violation of the Constitution. Before dismantling the "Tilted Arc", all the public hearings, media reporting and jury's decisions were concerning democratic process. Although the artist was not satisfied with the result, the enormous publicity had caught public attention to look into the issue. This provocative character to raise public attention is embedded in the democratic connotation of public art.

In "Monumentality" section, Maya Lee's VVM was first under a democratic process to choose, and later under public debates to argue whether it is suitable to the program or not. Although Lin considered the adding sculpture of human figures a different style from her abstract form, the democratic process resulted in compromising decision to allow the new group sculpture standing beside the original one. This final settlement showed a respect to the democratic process more than the author's artistic concept. In this democratic context, the compromising quality was valued and the hybrid consequence was accepted by the decision makers.

5. Improvisation

The improvisation of public art is about tempo-spatial practice of cultural significance. Some of its most prominent representations are architectures. On the other hand, a variety of architectures possess strong traits of public art. Nowadays the architects Frank Gehry and Santiago Calatrava's buildings are considered as public arts for various reasons. Gehry's Bilbo Museum is located along the beautiful riverfront and its metallic skin reminds people of the city's past glory. In other words, the building not only has aesthetic representation, but also deeply fits into the local context. Besides its formal fantasy, the improvisational performance according to its unique industrial location and specific economic timing is undeniable. It is a new kind of architecture with contemporary aura and exquisite formation. Its form is vibrant with poetic quality, and it brings people together and creates various activities. On the other hand, Calatrava's bridge in Bilbo is a small piece comparing with his other huge projects, but the bridge graceful suits its harbor surroundings and strongly increases the sensation of the new development, which aims at creating a new cultural hub and attracting international tourists. In this context, Gehry's Museum and Calatrava's bridge act as a fantastic improvisation to suit the purpose of city renovation and cultural transformation.

For public art, traditional artistic emphasis of material quality and articulation of form often is replaced by or incorporated with social and cultural connotations which state specific concepts or ideas. For architecture, some specific design methods outdate quickly because of the speedy technological advancement and enormous technological possibilities. This discontinuity of cultural flow often



requires the concept and practice of improvisation to adjust our behavior and balance our mind.

In this context, one of the most intriguing examples of public arts is the Storefront for Art and Architecture Gallery designed by Vito Acconci and Steven Holl. They cut the entire gallery wall with openings, and fill them with panels hinged horizontally or vertically. These swinging elements open and close following everyday routine, like that the body of the building is defied and consoled daily. Visitors walk in and out of various openings, becoming part of the scenario. The tempo-spatial experience of the storefront not only undermines traditional art environments, but also deconstructs architectural common sense:

....For the façade at Storefront....When the panels are closed, the cuts.... form an enigmatic pattern over the wall. When they swing open they dissolve the wall into louvers, tables, chairs, doors and other utilitarian elements. The critical readings of the work are rich, if blatant. A mysteriously adorned fortress wall defends the sacred but vulnerable art world from life on the street. Coyly, it offers peep holes to the vulgar voyeurs on both sides. When the panels open, the wall disintegrates, delivering the once sacred space to the routine of the street. Life becomes art, art becomes life.... (Kipnis, 2003:554)

In the design of Storefront for Art and Architecture, the designers try to create both critical spatial writing and experimental phenomenon in an improvisational manner. The essence of this inventive improvisation might lies on its blurring hybridization of dissolving conventional norm and relieving our creative energy. The multiple possibilities of improvisation aim at connecting the immediate environment to our inner feelings, the tempo-spatial phenomenon to our psychological perception and intelligent understanding. Basically, improvisation could be thought of as an “on the spot” spontaneous activity. “On the spot” is about space and location; it could be a useful approximation to “site specific” public art, as well as architecture’s concern of site and context. On the other hand, “spontaneous” concerns time and rhythm. This temporal element not only relates to architecture’s presentation, but also important to public art’s character of “temporality” which we mentioned in previous sector.

To conclude, the above mentioned five traits – controversy, monumentality, temporality, democracy and improvisation – could be some of the most intriguing characters in the filed of contemporary public art. Looking into their basic concepts and connotations might help us understand contemporary public art easily and quickly.



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