

Public Spaces – ‘Private Art’

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The fourth week in July, 1992 was brutally hot in Kassel. On the Friedrichplatz where, what had been called the world's "largest and most expensive art show," (Plagens, 1992), *Documenta IX*, was centered, an entrepreneur was selling plastic masks of *Documenta* curator Jan Hoet's likeness. Meanwhile, tens of thousands of European, American, and Japanese tourists marched in and out of the nine steaming buildings that housed works of art by 190 artists from 40 different countries. Not far from the man with the masks, a Korean artist, Keunbyung Yook, had erected a towering hollow grassy mound that emitted wafting meditative New Age music from hidden speakers. At the crest of the mound a video screen implanted into its center sported a third eye to keep an ever-present watch over the sweat-soaked visitors as they attempted to absorb "the most important anthology of contemporary art" (Plagens, 1992). Others lounged in one of the many beer gardens that dotted the *Documenta* grounds in an effort to give their senses a rest, as Jonathan Borofsky's *Man Walking to the Sky* relentlessly continued his frozen "walk" upward on a 25 meter diagonal steel pole that dominated the Friedrichplatz vista.

On a far edge of the Friedrichplatz, across from Documents-Halle, visitors cue up to enter a small cement hut. It is not a short wait to enter, as only seven to ten people are allowed in at a time, and one has the feeling of waiting in line for one of the rides at an amusement park. When finally admitted inside the visitor finds an attendant dressed in shorts sitting in front of a dark hole-in-the-ground created by the London-based Indian artist, Anish Kapoor.

The attendant warns us not to get too close for fear that someone might fall in. Nevertheless, we creep closer during our allotted time in the hut. This hole (which Kapoor has titled *Descent into Limbo*) is painted a rich velvety black. Its excruciatingly even texture is so perfect that I wonder if it is indeed a hole, or if it is some sort of velvety appliqué. I venture close enough to put my finger on the edge and discover that it is indeed a hole (Shaman, 1992:3-4).

Anish Kapoor's hole-in-the-ground was perhaps the most telling work of all of the *Documenta IX* for it so pointedly elucidated the vast void between the art object and the visitor. To put it succinctly, the contemporary art object has very little to offer the visitor in way of communication. As Christoph Becker wrote in the introduction to the *Documenta Guide*, "For artists the relationship between a work of art and

the world has been a fundamental and existential problem" (Becker, 1992:14). Thus Kapoor's void can be seen as a metaphor for the spiritual void in today's art that many critics agree accounts for art's inability to communicate with the visitor.

The spiritual purpose that was art's *raison d'être* in the first place has disappeared. One may argue that many artists are spiritually motivated and that they create works of art that are spiritually-charged, or are searching for answers to spiritual questions. But the truth is that few artists are willing to openly and directly communicate with the public. And as long as this is the dominant attitude, art can never reassume the position as "the great spiritual communicator" that it once held. For decades the pervasive attitude has been that of confrontation. Moreover, the predominant rhetoric is one based upon intellectual solutions which result in works that are coded, obscure and non-communicative.

Thus, when visitors to Documenta IX passed by a glass of water precariously perched upon two nails in the wall and containing an egg and a tiny wax sailboat they did just that — passed by. It is doubtful that much of the public understood this work to be a spiritually motivated communication — or in fact in any way communicative. And yet this work was exhibited by the Israeli sculptor Belu-Simion Fainaru, an artist who actively struggles with the question of the spiritual meaning of life. But his art works, like those of many of today's artists, can be described as the private exercises the artist employs in public spaces in an attempt to try to find answers to his personal struggle (Shaman, 1992:5; see note 1). Generally those with whom such works can communicate are limited to a small elite group of people. Thus our public exhibition spaces, where contemporary art is exhibited, are very often filled with what can be called private art — very private art. Fainaru himself agrees with this assessment:

... art now is an activity for some bourgeois rich people, bored people, and I feel as artists we are part of this group, and we just are entertainers. We entertain ourselves as people who can be bored, and we entertain other bored people, and art is very materialistic. It's incredible how materialistic it is....Of course I'm not satisfied with this.

... I become less and less convinced... — doing things to show in a space for one month. I know very well how much effort his is on the part of the artist or the institution, also how much money is put into it. The way all this activity goes on ... it's very silly.... Because it's a lot of effort by many people — from artists ... [to the staffs of] a gallery or museum — their printing catalogues, or writing them — it's a whole lot of people who have to work a lot. But the result? It's almost nonexistent (see note 2).

For scores of years those of us in art museums have been not unlike the Emperor's ministers in *The Emperor's New Clothes*, who afraid of appearing stupid or unfit for our positions, declared, "Oh, it is beautiful! most magnificent..." when in fact nothing was there. But Rami Rosen, a journalist for the noted Israeli newspaper, *Ha'aretz*, has recently written an article that calls to mind the child who said of the Emperor's new clothes: "But he has nothing on at all!" Rosen writes about his visit to the Israel Museum's exhibition of recent acquisitions of contemporary art — an exhibition consisting of works by internationally significant artists. Having visited the Museum on a holiday when hundreds of visitors were coming into the exhibition hall, he reports that: "The average visitor, independent of ethnic origin or sex, entered the hall with a certain curiosity, gave a brief look at the objects and in seconds his facial expression turned to astonishment; there were also exchanges of glances which led to verbal exchanges... — mostly ironic." Rosen toured the exhibition with a number of casual visitors and Museum Director Martin Weyl. After having seen a number of works in the exhibition, the group was unable to distinguish between the exhibited objects and a cart full of construction materials that some workers has inadvertently left in the gallery (Rosen, 1995:40).

Among the art objects that Rosen discusses is a stack of old newspapers (tied with a rope) by the American sculptor Robert Gober. This work like most in the exhibition was donated by a group of the Museum's FRIENDS in New York. Like the others in the exhibit, it was accompanied by a wall label detailing a complicated list of donors. One of the visitors, an economics student, poignantly pondered the possibility of "...how a couple of donors donate old newspapers to the Museums' FRIENDS in New York, how the FRIENDS sent the 'piece' with a limousine to El-Al, which flew the 'valuable parcel' inside a sealed box, and how the Museum sent a special car with a driver to deliver the newspapers to the Museum" (Rosen, 1995:40-1).

In the 1950's and into the 1960's the American painter Ad Reinhardt — as the result of developments in Abstract Expressionism and the artist's own search for the truth — began painting a series of smooth black paintings. These works can be seen as art turning in on itself, as they are very much about art and art history. Such works have their place in a museum, especially when presented among a progression of works from the 1950's and 1960's. But nevertheless they can serve to further confuse and "underwhelm" the viewer. Thus when Rosen and other visitors came upon one of Reinhardt's black paintings, someone exclaimed, "What is this black canvas doing here?" responding to Weyl's explanation of the work, one of the visitors retorted, "Pardon us, we don't pretend to be great experts in art, but this is a black canvas and there is nothing more to it..." Another person in the group queries, "What if the personal experience is zero?" (Rosen, 1995:42).

At the end of the tour Rosen spoke with the economics student who told him (Rosen, 1995: 42-44):

... this exhibition isn't only funny foolishness. There is arrogance and a brutal attitude on the part of the elite.... They way - 'we ... will exhibit to you.... And if this is not acceptable to you, go and get some education as to what is art.'

... This is the top 10% (see note 3) which dictates cultural taste to everyone and the difference is in the reactions of those who came. If you noticed, most of the people saw nothing... part of the people understood that it actually represents something, so they reacted with forgiveness. Some giggled or laughed and went away.

In a companion article that appeared with that of Rosen's, Itamar Levi wrote that the visit which Rosen described served to underscore the "...break between contemporary art and the visitor." Levi asserts that we have come to accept contemporary art as a kind of "foreign language." Just as "...the public doesn't understand physics or linguistics, it doesn't possess the tools to understand contemporary art" (Levi, 1995:44). Belu-Simion Făinaru has also said this about contemporary art. He believes that art "... has dissociated creative activity from [the larger] whole of society." And that now "... creative activity is specific to the art world. It's the same as in economics... film, and ... philosophy" (see note 4).

Taking the position that contemporary art is "elitist and patronizing," Levi goes on to explain that visitors to contemporary art exhibitions cannot find the proper response to art within themselves, because an understanding of today's art is dependent upon "... education, status [and] cultural background." According to Levi, art today "...is not expressive .. [of] feelings and universal experiences," but rather it is "tough" and "conceptual," and "... addresses a very selective group of people." Finally Levi goes to the heart of the matter, when he writes: "Artists, critics and curators can promote elitist art, but they have an obligation to know that someone on the other side will feel cheated, outcasted, and humiliated" (Levi, 1995:44).

Potentially, art museums, public art galleries, kunsthallen, and other public spaces can offer the visitor numerous opportunities for cultural and spiritual growth. Museum professionals and curators are the keepers of a great spiritual resource. And it is their job as Michael Belcher noted in his article, "Communicating Through Museum Exhibitions," to "...facilitate an encounter between the object and the observer." (Michael Belcher, 1984: 403). Through this encounter the museum professional can open the doors to human, personal and spiritual development for the visitor. But as Rami Rosen so vividly described, the art which today's artists create and the art we choose to exhibit raises doubts about just what kind of encounter we can

facilitate. Many artists challenge that which distinguishes the art object from other objects, and there is a tendency toward art that is camouflaged or hidden. According to the French philosopher, Jean Beaudrillard, one no longer looks at works of art, but rather "...merely decode[s] them according to increasingly contradictory criteria" (Beaudrillard, 1990:52). In other words, art is becoming more and more private and insular. This is an art the public cannot understand, and as Rosen graphically illustrated, makes little, if no attempt to invite understanding. Thus our public exhibition spaces are filled with art that can be described as the very antithesis of what is public, and more often than not, a visit to a contemporary art exhibition proves to be an "underwhelming" experience. As Beaudrillard notes, the only thing contemporary trends in art inspire is "profound indifference" (Beaudrillard, 1990:52).

Many critics agree that it is art's lack of spiritual content that renders much of today's art private and non-communicative. According to Beaudrillard, "... in many ways art has ... disappeared. It has lost its spirit, its enterprise, its powers of illusion and transcendence." The noted American critic Donald Kuspit underscores this point when he writes of the "... doubt about the 'higher' purpose of art in our civilization — the suspicion that it has become increasingly devoid of spirit and authenticity [and] that [art] hides behind hype and the mystique of a rare commodity" (Kuspit, 1990:47). In her article, "The Reenchantment of Art," critic Suzi Gablik notes:

... I have been teaching and lecturing a great deal about the ways that art has become a mirror for the manic materialism of our culture. And ... I came to understand how much, as individuals and as a culture, we have suffered our deep creativity and spiritual well-being to become damaged in the bureaucratic drives for power and profit...

... The tragedy of the modern Western mind has been our inability to generate cosmologies that are life-enhancing. Other civilizations created Altamira, Stonehenge, the Pyramids, Chartres, Borobudur; ours has produced the shopping mall and the cooling tank. (Gablik, 1987:30).

It would seem that much of the art world has lost its ability to fully *see* art. The only thing that seems to matter is what John Gardner has defined as "rebellion and innovation" (Gardner, 1964:42). But in our obsession for rebellion and innovation, we have lost our view of the complete picture, and we have forgotten why we have undertaken the search in the first place. If art is to effectively function in society, then art must begin to refocus on the greater community. And I contend we must open the channel of communication between art and the public. And the way in which art has always truly communicated with the public throughout history is

spiritually. As Suzi Gablik asserts, this is the way that art can truly reassume the significant role it once held in society:

If it is accurate to trace our present dilemmas to what has been called 'the disenchantment of the world,' then presumably the solution must somehow involve the reenchantment of the world. In a culture which considers the spirit as nothing and the product as everything, what are the implications of this for art? Whatever is implied by the process of reenchantment, it is unlikely to rest solely with divesting art of its Modernist presumption of self-sufficiency, its egocentricity, or its underling antipathy to shared experience and communal values.

Perhaps we need another kind of art at this point ... one which exercises its power to administrate the social dreaming, through images which empower the collective unconscious. I am talking about art which speaks to the power of connectedness and establishes bonds, art that calls us into relationship, and thus addresses our failure to grasp what it means to be actively related to the cosmos. (Gablik, 1987:31-2).

As we consider facts, figures and statistics about visitors, and how we can deal with them more efficiently, let us not lose sight of the content and the nature of the experience with which we provide the visitor. The words of Itamar Levi warning that those who promote "... elitist art... have an obligation to know that someone on the other side will feel cheated, outcasted, and humiliated," (Levi, 1995:4), rings true for those who work with visitors. In other words, it is not enough to be solely involved with bringing visitors to a public space, we must also be involved with the quality and the depth of the visit once they get there. All of us who work in public spaces have an obligation to provide the visitor with a meaningful experience. And if the public space is an art museum, it should also be a profound experience.

Art is a reflection of society. It shows us the state that society is in. Thus, the void discussed in this paper is a reflection of the great amount of healing that is needed not only throughout society, but also throughout the planet. I would contend that all of us — no matter what our work — as responsible citizens of this planet, which is so desperately in need of healing, have a responsibility to begin considering what role we can assume in the healing process. This means that each of us must search deep inside to see if our work is part of the healing or part of that which is in need of healing.

Notes

1. The discussion on *Documenta IX* found in this paper has been incorporated from a brochure by the author. See: Sanford Sivitz

Shaman, *The Israeli Artists of Documenta IX* (Haifa: University of Haifa, 1992), 3-5.

2. From an interview with Belu-Simion Fainaru by the author, due to be published in *The Journal Of Contemporary Art*.
3. In reality those who "dictate cultural taste" represent a minutely small group -- dramatically smaller than 10%.
4. From an interview with Belu-Simion Fainaru by the author, due to be published in *The Journal of Contemporary Art*.

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