

## 1. THE ESCAPE FROM ART.

The person who chooses to do public art might be considered a refugee, in flight from the gallery/museum which has been established as the proper occasion for art in our culture at this time. Escape from the confines of that space means losing the privileges of its laboratory condition: the privilege, for example, of specialization either in the form of art (art considered as a system of universals) or in the context of art (art considered as a system of commodities). Abdicating from the accustomed space of art, the public artist declares himself/herself uninterested in art questions, and no longer involved in the development of art as we've known it, in our culture, at this time. Public art revises the present of art and conjectures as to its future: a time when art might be considered not as a separable category, in its own arena and with its own products, but as an atmosphere instilled, almost secretly, within other categories of life.

## 2. LIFE ON THE EDGE: MARGINALITY AS THE CENTER OF PUBLIC ART.

Inside the gallery/museum, the artist functions as the center of a particular system; once outside that system, the artist is lost between worlds -- the artist's position, in our culture, is marginal. The public artist can turn that marginality to his/her advantage. The public artist is forced, physically, off to the side; the public artist is asked to deal not with the building but with the sidewalk, not with the road but with the benches at the side of the road, not with the city but with the bridges from city to city. Outside and in between centers, the public artist is under cover; public art functions, literally, as a marginal note: it can comment on, and contradict, the main body of the text of a culture.

## 3. THE INNOCENT BYSTANDER AND THE ANXIETY OF CHOICE.

When a person enters a gallery/museum, that person announces himself/herself as an art-viewer; the art-viewer submits to the terms of the art arena, the art-viewer agrees to be a victim. Outside the gallery/museum, in a public place, there is no art-viewer; there are only passers-by, with different histories and varying biases. These people haven't asked for art; when they come across a public art-work, they see it not as 'art' but simply as something else in their world, something that hadn't been there before. Public art, in order to exist in the world, agrees to certain social conventions, certain rules of peaceful co-existence; the public artist gives up the gallery artists' privilege of imposition. Using manners as a cover, public art can lie low; instead of attacking, public art insinuates. The objects of public art are not things in themselves but only an excuse for time -- time for people to look around, grope around, and find things out for themselves.

## 4. A GEOMETRY OF CONVENTIONS.

The words 'public art' should be taken literally: on the one hand, a piece is public in that it's usable, inhabitable -- on the

other hand, a piece is public in that its forms and images are conventions (like a house-form, like an advertising image) that everyone, in a particular culture, knows as a matter of habit. When a convention is used by an artist/architect/designer, it can no longer be used vernacularly; the conscious use of the convention rarefies it into a distinct, regular, and easily recognizable shape or volume. Like a Platonic solid, the convention can be subjected now to a set of mental operations: conventions are additive, or subtractive -- one convention can be rotated, as if on a grid -- two conventions can collide with and interpenetrate one another... These operations, by isolating a convention, exhibit that convention as an icon that ~~cannot~~ can't be further broken down, can't be analyzed. The operation of one convention with and against another subverts the power that each convention is a sign of.

5. PUBLIC ART AND THE PUBLIC WELFARE.

When an artist enters public space, he/she enters politics. Public art, mixing in with the other things of the world, either confirms or subverts that world, and the power structure that organizes it. Whereas politics, in order to maintain itself as a system, is forced to sustain a single key, art-as-politics is free to take different sides at the same time. This capacity of multiple viewpoints explodes a monolithic organization of power. The public artist falls into a double-bind situation: subverting a dominant culture at the same time keeps that culture an open system -- it allows that culture to revivify and keep itself going. A more efficient subversion, then, might lie in confirming and re-confirming the elements of a culture, so that the culture has no breathing room and will slowly die off. But this method of subversion demands patience, cynicism, and a blind trust in evolution.

6. RIP UP THE POSTERS; DISMANTLE THE BILLBOARDS.

The appropriate medium of political messages is assumed to be the poster. Its appropriateness lies in its two-dimensionality: the edges of the paper separate the message within from all other messages, so that it can be focused on -- the edges of the paper function as a framing device that signals a summarization that can then be analyzed by a viewer/reader -- analysis of the poster leads to action, away from the poster and out into the world-at-large. But the two-dimensionality of the poster, at the same time, leaves the poster in front of the eyes, and distant from the body of the person reading it. The poster confirms a mind-body separation: the mind might be influenced by the poster and might then impel the body to action, but all the while the body is in a world of its own, out of the poster's reach -- the body keeps its own habits -- at any moment the body might rebel. The real political message is not in the poster but in the wall that supports the poster, in the ground that supports the person who reads the poster. It is this wall and this floor that is the proper arena for a radical public art.



7. BUILDING AS NOSTALGIA/NOSTALGIA AS RESISTANCE.

The built environment, in an electronic age, is a throwback to an industrial era. In an age when quantities of places can be stored on a disc, the built environment occupies too much space; it takes too much time to walk through the built environment, in an age when distant places can be brought home on television. Public art, as a gathering place for people, functions as a model of the city; but the city loses its importance when any person, wherever that person might be, can gather all the information of the city on a computer terminal. By reinstating a model from another time, public art makes apparent the contradictions of a current time. The electronic age, while supposedly eliminating boundaries, enforces the image of a person alone at a computer -- it enforces images of single units and separation. The electronic age makes for an easy escape from the mixed crowds of the city; instead of having to go outside, to the suburbs, a person only has to go within, in between headphones and inside an automobile capsule. This resort to privacy is a withdrawal from the peopled places that lead to discussions that lead to arguments that lead to reconsiderations that lead potentially to a revolution. In a world of shopping malls, public art reinserts the town square.

8. THE TWO TRADITIONS OF PUBLIC ART.

The older tradition is that of the monument; the newer tradition, which is fast becoming the contemporary standard, is street-and-park furniture. The monument asserts itself too much; it stands apart from its environment and over the heads of people; its message is -- the individual is important, but some individuals are more important than others. Street-and-park furniture, on the other hand, recedes too far into its environment, and plays up to the habits of people; its message is -- be programmed, be comfortable, there's no reason to change. Each tradition has to be resisted on its own terms. 1. Bring the monument down to earth, where it can be entered and be overrun by people (this makes the verticle horizontal, and lays low the <sup>dominant</sup> male principle). **DOMINANT**  
2. Instead of providing furniture, build something that people, using their own ingenuity, might happen to make use of as <sup>something</sup> like furniture (rather than people at the mercy of furniture, this is furniture at the mercy of people).

9. TWO MODELS FOR PUBLIC ART: THE CURB AND THE SPACESHIP.

The curb, or the lamppost, or the fire hydrant, goes almost unnoticed; it's as if it's always been there. This kind of public art blends in with its surroundings, and can criticize from within. The spaceship lands in an alien place; it revels in its look as if it came out of nowhere, it makes no attempt at camouflage to fit its surroundings. This kind of public art can criticize from the outside, like a future-studies scenario. (The contemporary version of the spaceship is the park, which is set up as an oasis inside the city, separate from the city. The park substitutes greenery from a past time for the spaceship's white of the future.)

WORLD

OF THINKING, AND  
OF TALKING,

10. BEING THERE: THINKING FROM THE INSIDE OUT.

Being in the ~~world~~ <sup>WORLD</sup> means being encased in the world. Our habit of thinking is: in order to analyze the world you have to step ~~out~~ <sup>SIDE</sup> ~~of~~ the world, jump out of the world. This habit <sup>allows</sup> ~~allows~~ the construction of a self to exist (you 'go out of your self,' you 'take your self out of it'). The implication is that, as long as you're inside the world, you're too close to the world to think about it; you can't experience and analyze at the same time. But, no matter how far you go, mentally, out of the world, you're still physically inside it. Taking yourself out of the world, mentally, only means a retreat from material conditions, on the one hand, and from people, on the other. The implication is that you can think only when you're alone, only when you withdraw into a meditation chamber. One function of public art is to re-embed a person inside material conditions and within the company of other people; one function of public art is to learn, and teach, a simultaneity of experience and analysis; one function of public art is to undo the construction of a self.

Acconci  
Nov 1987