

ANTONIO SOHRANI

Vito Acconci

MAKING PUBLIC: THE WRITING AND READING OF PUBLIC SPACE

September 1993

Public space is made and not born. What's called 'public space' in a city is produced by a government agency (in the form of a park) or by a private corporation (in the form of a plaza in front of an office building, or an atrium inside the building). What's produced is a 'product': it's bartered, by the corporation, in exchange for air rights, for the rights to build their building higher -- it's granted, by the government agency, to people as a public benefit, as part of a welfare system. What's produced is a 'production': a spectacle that glorifies the corporation or the state, or the two working together (the two having worked together in the back room, behind the scenes, with compromises and pay-offs). The space, then, is loaned to the public, bestowed on the public -- the people considered as an organized community, members of the state, potential consumers. Public space is a contract: between big and small, parent and child, institution and individual. The agreement is that public space belongs to them, and they in turn belong to the state.

Milling in the crowd, lost in the crowd, are the 'others' -- the outsiders, the people who have broken the contract, the people who don't have a home here. Public space does not belong to them. They can be tourists, transients, scouts; but they can never be inhabitants. For them, public space has to be taken. Public space is not a contract but a strategy. Public space is a discovery: the site is found, and explored -- the flag is planted -- the property is requisitioned. Public space is re-made, in their own image.

But, if we take the space, we can only hold it for a while, until the police come. We'll have made <sup>our</sup> point, but we don't have a program. So we draw back: read -- learn -- calculate -- simplify -- complicate...

Read the words 'public space' literally, doggedly, dumbly. A space is 'public' when: 1) its forms are public, its forms are publicly usable -- they can be sat on, walked over, crawled under, run through, sprawled across, lived in; 2) its meanings are public, its meanings are publicly accessible -- the place is made up of conventions, images, signs, objects, that everyone in a particular culture knows automatically, knows by heart; 3) its effect is public, its effects are publicly instrumental -- the place shapes both the public that uses it and the public agency that organizes it. This third term thickens the plot. A space is public when it either maintains the public order, or changes the public order. A space is public, on the one hand, when it functions as a public prison: its conventions, images, signs, objects become facts of life -- they make an system of order in which everything is in its proper place, and the citizens follow suit. A space is public, on the other hand, when it functions as a public forum: its conventions, images, signs, objects are turned upside-down, or collided one with the other, or broken into bits, so that those conventions are de-stabilized (they're not solid facts anymore) and the power that grounds each convention is exposed (the space becomes an occasion for discussion, which might become an argument, which might become a revolution).

A public space, on a city plan, is an in-between place, or an out-of-the-way place. It exists as a transition between home and work-place, or it exists on the margins of either home or work-place. The public space is between, or to the side of, the intimacy of home and the aggression of work -- between 'love' at home and 'war' outside the home, at work. Through the medium of a public space, a person is transported out of the home and out of the work-place, and inserted into city-space. A public space is a civic space, and a civilized place: within its boundaries is a world of civility, manners, and codes. Each person, having a right to be there, has the responsibility to respect other people's rights. No person owns a place within the public space; each place changes hands: now it's occupied by one person, now by another. Each person has the right to a particular place, but only so long as he/she stays there, in place, only so long as he/she keeps his/her place (obeys the rules of the public space);

when that person moves on (or when that person is moved off, by the authorities), another person can move right in. One person after another 'rents' the space, each person has the rights of a tenant; for the time being, each person has his/her own rightful place, in the middle of the public space and contiguous to every other person's rightful place. This kind of public space is a conglomerate of private spaces, private (temporary) residences. The terms of the tenancy are: you can keep your place, as long as you keep to your place. If you move away from it, you can't move your place with you, as you move toward and into the place of another: you've lost your place, and the rights to that place, and you don't gain the rights to the other person's place. You can (if the other person lets you) encounter the other person, and share the place, but you can't have the place (the exact spot the other person occupies): you can't move the other person's body out of the way, nor can your body blend with that body -- you can, for example, (if the other person lets you) touch, or kiss, or hug, but you'd better not fuck (at least not where others can see you). You have a place here, within the public space, the way you have a parking space; you enter another person's place the way you enter the vestibule of a home; the public space is pre-space -- an occasion for introductions, temptations, making plans for the future (the real mix of privacies has to take place later, elsewhere, in 'your place or mine').

Keep telling yourself: it's only a dream...it's only a novel...it's only a movie...it's only a video game...Keep telling yourself: it can't happen here, this is a public space...

A public space is occupied by private bodies. These private bodies have hidden feelings, and private lives, and secret dreams. Underneath the manners, underneath the civilities, underneath the appearances, underneath the clothes, is a seething mass of anger and desire. The terrain of a public space is a plane, a platform, that supports bodies; the terrain might have walls, either physical or metaphorical -- it

functions as a container of bodies. But the platform quakes, the container trembles at the boiling point. The wonder of the city is: with all these bodies crowded next to each other, one on top of the other -- why aren't they all tearing each other's clothes off, why aren't they all fucking each other, left and right (and up and down, and in and out, and back and forth...)? The wonder of the city is: with all these bodies blocking each other, standing in each other's way, why aren't they all tearing each other apart limb from limb, and wolfing each other down? Public space is the last gasp of the civilized world; public space is the Great White Hope; public space is belief and religion; public space is wishful thinking.

A public space is not a space in itself but the representation of space. A public space is a game-board for mating games and war games. A bench, at the edge of a promenade, is a simulation of spying; face-to-face seats, across a table, simulate oral sex; a running track, or a playground, is a simulation of fascist body-cults; a meandering pathway simulates getting lost, and disappearing -- simulated suicide; trees and bushes simulate a hiding-place for crime; a playing field is simulated war; a pond, a fountain, simulate cleansing after a bloody battle, or a sweaty fuck. Public space is the domestication of war and sex.

From an aerial view, the public spaces of a city appear as holes, within the density of buildings. It's as if land-mines have been planted, throughout the city; buildings have been exploded, here and there, to make way for public spaces. In the midst of a city of walls, a public space is an open space. You can drift and meander here, but only so long as you stay within the boundaries of the public space; when you cross over those boundaries, you're caught up in the routes and circulation systems and directions of the city. Within the bounds of the public space, you can walk as long as you want, but you end up walking in circles; this open space is a closed system. A public space is an exposed space; as in a small town, everyone knows what everyone else is doing. There are places to

run, but no place to hide. In the midst of a city of roofs, a public space is an open space, it's open to view. From an aerial view, a public space is the city's playpen, the city zoo, where the inmates are empowered to go where and when and how they choose --because, all the while, they can be watched.

Birds; pigeons. Airplanes; helicopters. The birds and airplanes pass over the public space, they disappear off into the distance, with the promise that there's a world out there; meanwhile, the pigeons and the helicopters have swooped down, they're hovering over our heads.

Public space is a publicity system. The space functions, first, as advertising for itself: it draws the public to itself, by means of a visible sign, or a rumor spread through the public, or a memory kept in one private mind after the other -- at the same time, perversely, it has to keep at least some of the public away, it has to put some of the public off, so that it can be read from a distance as a 'public space.' Inside, the public space advertises its sponsor: it promulgates the message and values of the civic or corporate institution that built it, or of the revolutionary group that's taken it over. The city gets, or makes, the kind of public space it deserves: the structure and forms of the public space advertise the city's biases -- stability or change, single-mindedness or multiplicity, old or young, power-culture or minority cultures, male or female.

A space that's usable by people becomes, in the end, used, and used up. The ultimate public space is a ravaged space: the space has been used so much by people that the space is used up, it disintegrates under their feet. The public space is purified now, it's made up of nothing but bodies: the bodies are floating on air...there are so

many bodies that the air is squeezed out...the people give each other mouth-to-mouth resuscitation...

'I wasn't myself.' 'Who were you then? Who are you now? Where are you? When are who you might be? What are you anyway?'

The body is public when it crosses the boundary of the body. The public body crosses genders and mixes races; the public body is neither one nor the other, neither here nor there -- it's all bodies at once. The body made public is the body that keeps making itself public: it grows, out of itself, another body, which in turn grows another body, which grows another body, etc. The root of the word 'public' -- the Latin publicus -- is influenced by the Latin puber, pubes: grown up, adult, puberty. 'Public,' with just one letter missing (the letter of the law), becomes 'pubic' (the spirit of the law). Public space is construction, an addition to pubic space; pubic space is de-construction, a subtraction from public space. 'Public' contains 'pubic': the public body carries the pubic body within itself -- the pubic body resides, like an alien presence, inside the public body. 'Pubic' is extended to 'public': the pubic body is latched on to, by the public body -- the public body clings to the pubic body, like a leech. The pubic body, adding to itself to become the public body, 'comes out' and will never be himself/herself again; the public body, subtracting from itself to become the pubic body, is a man/woman without a country, and can't go home again. The body drifts into space; space drives the body out of the body.

The 'space' of public space can itself be made public -- not to function for a public but to be public (open, common, out of itself) in itself. A space is made public when it gives up being made, and lets itself go. A space begins to go public when it goes out of

itself, separates from itself: the space splits and splinters, and rips i self to shreds and rips itself asunder. A unified public space is broken up into multiple, local public spaces. But these spaces remain physical; this act of making public is only a rehearsal for a non-physical public-making. The space drifts off into space, into its connotation of outer space. A space goes public when it continues to go until it disappears into the public: the space dissolves into neurons and waves and particles. The space becomes a network of parallel spaces -- physical space, projective space, topological space -- that mix into one intertwined space transmitted through telephone, television, computer. A public space now, in the world of flesh and blood, is only a dream: the dream of its own dissolution. The goal of public space is to dissolve into the nerves of the public; the goal of public space is for space and public to be one and the same.

If the dissolution of public space is in the future, the dissolution of public art is here and now. Public art is neither a thing nor a space nor a time. Public art should neither be seen nor heard. Public art has no place in public space; if you know you're in public art, then you're only in a museum that's been transposed outdoors. Public art gives way to public space and stays behind the scenes; public art is not a substance but a shadow -- it throws its shadow -- public art is the instrument that produces a public space. The 'art' in public art is not an object but 'the power of performing certain actions; skill; dexterity' (Webster's Third New International Dictionary, p. 122). The 'art' of public art takes pride in its connotations of guile, cunning, trickery. The function of public art is to make or break a public space. On the one hand, it hunts down public spaces, it finds them where none existed before, in the nooks and crannies of privacy (in between buildings, under buildings, at the edge of buildings); the act of public art annexes territories, into the public realm. On the other hand, it loses public spaces; it takes a space that's ordained to be public -- an institutionalized public space -- and comes up from under it: the act of public art disintegrates the public space, so that the public can take it with them, on their backs or in their nerves.