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Public Art, Public Space and Service Design: Communication Between Artists and Audience

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ABSTRACT

Since the 1980s, cities in Europe, the US and other regions have witnessed a "renaissance" of public art. More and more artists have also begun to focus on the design process of public art, as well as the definition, function and its impact on urban development. These discussions mostly focus on the concept of public art itself and its location in public space, with little attention given to the relationship between public art and public space, its intended audience and the service functions it should provide. This article starts from the classification and function of public art, and re-examines the relationship between public art and public space, its service functions and effects based on Dewey's "art as communication" theory, as well as the link between artists and audiences in public space settings. Through some case studies, this research discusses the impact of public art and hopes that public artists will take responsibility for optimizing the quality of public space services by involving the audience in the design process of public art.

Keywords: Public space, Public art, Communication, Audience, Engagement

INTRODUCTION: ART IN PUBLIC SPACE

Public art potentially includes various forms of creative expression in public space. Public art may be site-specific, a product of artistic creativity designed for a specific public site, or place-specific, a creative product resulting from collaboration between artists and communities (Fisher, 1996). Place-specific art differs significantly from art that is only, or mainly, specific to a given site.

Site-Specific Public Art

Phillips (1988) said that public art is a field that lacks a clear definition, a constructive theory and a consistent goal. Some researchers have defined 'public art' very broadly. Miles (2005) categorised public art as works within the space and convention of art galleries and museums, which are open to public access. Omar, Sakip and Akhir (2016) suggested that artworks traditionally exhibited in galleries and buildings show exclusivity, whereas artworks that are scattered around outdoor public spaces nowadays for ordinary people to enjoy constitute public art. These examples indicate that although there is no consistent definition of public art, there is always a relationship, in that

public art occupies public space. Public art is usually created for a specific position or site, and is related to its environment.

Other researchers have studied public art from the perspective of the art form. They hold that in addition to traditional landscape art and other forms of 'high' visual cultural expressions, art forms in public space (Cosgrove, 1985; Rees, 1976) include performances, installations (Hawkins, 2010a), photography (Hawkins, 2010b; Lombard, 2013), monuments (Johnson, 1995), sculptures (Morris and Cant, 2006), plays (Daya, 2011), sound art (Butler, 2006; DeSilvey, 2010), community art (Rose, 1997) and street art (McAuliffe, 2012). Most of these artistic practices are not displayed in museums and art galleries but performed or embodied in streets, squares and other public spaces. Landi (2012) holds the opinion that public art encompasses both functional objects in the landscape and expressive, decorative forms, either permanent or temporary, that belong to any established classic or contemporary artistic disciplines, including, but not limited to, sculpture, murals and relief, all of which are installed with the intent to enhance, physically define, promote or establish identity in a space or a place. These characteristics show that public art is a kind of visual practice that integrates, expresses and conveys vision, image and space. It can include all art forms, and its parameters are constantly expanding.

The above discussion positions public art as a kind of visual art or artistic expression set up and performed in public space and taking various artistic forms. More importantly, it indicates that public art and public space are inseparable.

Place-Specific Public Art

The 'public' in public art can be either site-specific or place-specific. The term 'site' represents the constituent physical properties of a place, its mass, space, light, duration, location and material process, whereas 'place' represents the practical, vernacular, psychological, social, cultural, ceremonial, ethnic, economic, political and historical dimensions of a site (Siu and Huang, 2013).

Place-specific public artists idealise public art as space that promotes public relations and citizen participation by providing open and inclusive opportunities for participation and interaction between strangers (Walzer, 1995). Unlike site-specific public art, place-specific public art is more like a source of intergroup association, 'the common ground where people carry out the functional and ritual activities that bind a community' (Carr, Francis and Rivlin, 1992).

This approach regards public art as more than just a public work of art in space; the focus is not on the end product but emphasises people's experiences in the production process (Sharp, 2007). Bonin-Rodriguez (2015) suggested that public art is the expression of life and direct participation in various public and public issues, and that artists can contribute creatively to community issues. Knight (2011) regarded public art as conceived for large audiences and placed in open spaces to provide edifying, commemorative, or entertaining experiences for everybody.

The above discussion regards public art as place-specific, encompassing not only the physical aspects of the space but also the related social concepts. From the perspective of social participation, public art solves the social problem of exclusion from 'community' space or lack of opportunities through art. By providing various activities for different audiences, art space allows for community participation and interaction within and between groups.

The Function of Public Art Based on Site- and Place

Based on the previous discussion about site-specific and space-specific art, researchers have made several interrelated claims concerning the place-making potential of public art (Hall and Robertson, 2001; Zebracki, Van Der Vaart and I Van Aalst, 2010) and the different aspects of value creation it can achieve.

The physical characteristics of public art in its surroundings (Grodach, 2010) can beautify the environment (Hall and Smith, 2004) and enable the community to participate in environmental improvement. Through public art, artists even can enhance urban planning and urban design strategies. Cooperation between artists and architects can promote the integration of art, architecture and landscape to a higher level.

Public art can also create economic value, and promote the development of communities, cities and urban areas (Currid, 2010). By the 1980s, scholars increasingly acknowledged the contribution of public art to the urban renaissance (Sharp, Pollock and Paddison, 2005). Public art can attract tourists and investors from within and beyond the local community (Hall and Robertson, 2001), boosting tourism and the local economy.

Public art can also create social value by instilling civic pride, promoting social interaction, raising community awareness, strengthening local identity and reducing social exclusion (Miles, 2005; Rose, 1997; Sharp, Pollock and Paddison, 2005; Simpson, 2011). Public art is regarded as a tool for community participation and cooperative activity. It can improve public spaces for cultural and social interaction, increase the sense of security and reduce the fear of public spaces. It can also provide a way for the public to participate in the planning, design and creation of public space, a form of 'democratic art' (Becker, 2004).

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ART AND COMMUNITY

The value created by public art has prompted artists to re-examine its function and use it to express and convey various information in public spaces (Hawkins, 2010a). Dewey argued that art is 'the most effective mode of communication that exists' and 'the most universal and free form of communication' (Dewey, 2008). The key to his argument is that when art is closely linked to people's daily lives, it becomes a form of communication. Through this communication, people can understand each other's similarities and differences, break down barriers of understanding and ritual, and develop commonalities to define communities. Compared to other forms of communication, public art can express meanings that language cannot convey by

creating a new experience, and it also has a positive role in promoting the development of the community.

Linking Art to the Community

Doss (1992) proposed that art is a kind of social contract, a medium of communication between artists and audiences. As a powerful method of communication, art has unique advantages in creating 'community'. Because 'communication is a process of creation and participation', it can 'make isolated and single things common'. Art can create and strengthen common ground by sharing experience if the artist creates a work of art that integrates the seemingly disparate and unrelated experiences of members of the social group. By publicly expressing people's common history, experiences and concerns through art, the artist potentially creates new shared meaning in the life of a social group to enhance their sense of connection and cohesion. For example, murals in street art help to develop and strengthen the common memory and common understanding. When artists integrate the experiences and history of social groups to create murals to express 'who we are', they increase cohesion and integration within the social group. Because of the common experience conveyed by murals, people experience new emotions when observing them. Other art forms have similar functions that contribute to the internal cohesion and development of the community.

The miniature art on the waterfront promenade of Victoria Harbour (shown in Figure 1) was created by the miniature artist Yi Antai. Through these miniature artworks, we can recall the past and pass on the feel and culture of old Hong Kong from generation to generation. The mini television fixed with cement to the promenade railing allows people to enjoy the beautiful scenery of Hong Kong, also they can do some interactive activities, such as capture photos with public artworks. They may also discover other works inlaid into the floor tiles, causing intrigue and stimulating their memories of 'home'.

Figure 1: Hong Kong cottage on the waterfront promenade, Victoria Harbour (photos by authors).

Public Art With Community

Art can help organise community groups, promote awareness of common problems and build the support and commitment needed for public issues. With this in mind, there is a more participatory form of public art practice commonly known as the 'new type of public art'. Art has always been used as a medium and tool for artists to express and convey information. More recently, artists have begun to 'engage with communities and existing social struggles, to develop collaboration and dialogue with residents, and to employ different modes of address' (Sharp, 2007).

Unlike sculptures or installations in public places in the past, these forms of artistic creation pay more attention to social issues, the ecological environment and community identity, and are more 'relational', 'connective', 'conversational' and 'dialogical' than before (Iannelli & Marelli, 2019). Artists try to create locally through practical action, seeking consensus as a core goal, opening a dialogue with the community and letting the public participate in the entire process from the beginning. The aim of such public art is not to turn the public into professional artists, nor to showcase the artistic objects produced by the public. It is about giving everyone the opportunity to take part and interact. Public participation has become an important part of public art.

In 2020, the Hong Kong Leisure and Cultural Services Department launched the Viva! River public art project to revitalise the Tuen Mun River and its surrounding areas. To learn more about the area, art creators entered into dialogue with community groups and visited and experienced the schools, shopping centres, parks and residential areas. A wide range of activities and collaborations with Tuen Mun community residents created six sets of public artworks, including sculptures, urban furniture, knitted art and interactive installations with musical elements. This public art series renewed the riverside's appearance and stimulated people to reimagine the public space. The Viva! River project was accompanied by creative community activities and interactive videos all along the Tuen Mun River, as shown in Figure 2.

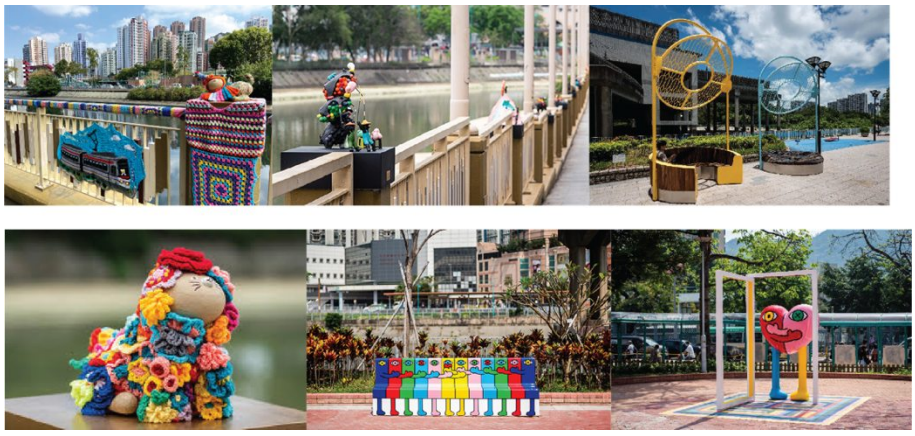

Figure 2: Viva! river project (adapted from leisure and cultural service department, 2021.)

Multiple Identities for Artists

Public art is different from works of art displayed in museums and art galleries. The act of placing or performing a work of creative expression in a public space alters how the space is seen and how audiences see the work. If it is sufficiently noticeable and engaging, it may also change how both the artist and the audience see themselves and their world. Public art is, at essence, a form of communication, which leads to a change in the artists' identity.

Lacy (1995) defined four steps for an artist's identity, including experiencer, reporter, analyst and activist. As shown in Figure 3, the artist begins as an experiencer and gradually progresses to a reporter, analyst, activitist, and finally a communicator, which clearly requires the establishment of dialogue and communication. When there is no rapid solution to some urgent and complex social problems, artists can only use their ability to feel and experience the reality around the public, which is the service provided by artists for the world ('experiencer'). With further development, artists are no longer satisfied with merely focusing on experience but more on the narration of situations; In other words, artists begin to collect information for others to use. They choose information consciously, though not necessarily by analysing it ('reporter'). From reporting or presenting information to analysis is a small step, but the artist's role has changed dramatically. The first two steps emphasise the skills of artists, such as intuitive, receptive, experiential and observation. Artists began to analyse the social situation through their art ('analyst'). The fourth step along the proposed continuum is from analysis to activism, where art-making is contextualised within local, national, and global situations, and audiences are included as active participants. When they became civic activists, they began to develop a skill - working with people. The question that separation is the primary position of art and undertake the consensual production of meaning with the public ('activist'). The last but most important step is artists as 'communicators'. To better understand how to reach a consensus with the public, artists must learn how to communicate and cooperate with the public, clarify visual and process symbols for people who have never received art education, and understand the public's ideas and help them express themselves.

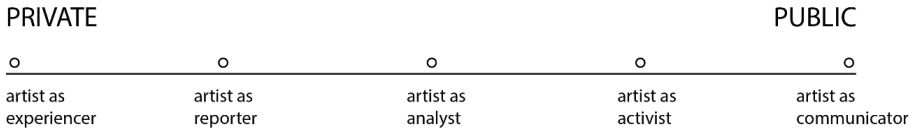

Figure 3: The change in an artist's identity (adapted from Lacy, 1995).

The Case of Public Art Audiences in Hong Kong

However, once a public artwork is incorporated into the everyday lives of urban citizens, the meaning derived from it will not necessarily correspond to its iconographies or the intentions of its producer (Hall and Smith, 2005).

Misunderstandings can arise between artists and audiences in relation to public art. As this art usually contains complex information at multiple levels,

it may have an unintended effect on the audience if it appears to be inappropriate. For example, topics such as ecological disaster, nuclear threat, fear, death, suicide and others pose a threat to people and elicit negative emotions. While an artist may want to guide the public to know, understand and even resolve these negative issues through public art, the choice of an inappropriate art form may lead the audience to misunderstand the artwork and can even strengthen their negative psychological stance. Therefore, artists need to re-examine the importance of the audience and 'understand what the public needs [in order] to appreciate, discover and utilise public art' (Hall and Smith, 2005).

Antony Gormley's *Event Horizon*, exhibited by the British Council in Hong Kong (see Figure 4). Gormley says, 'this project is an invitation to look up... the principle dynamic of the work is the relationship between imagination and the horizon, involving the citizen in a game of seeking and perhaps finding' (Azzarello, 2015). The purpose of his work, consisting of 31 fibreglass statues, was to challenge people to look up and engage with familiar places in a new way, to stimulate questions on how human nature responds to the built environment (HK Magazine, 2016). However, this public artwork was poorly suited to the social context of Hong Kong, where each year approximately 500 people kill themselves by jumping off buildings, accounting for 40 to 50 per cent of all local suicides. As a result, Event Horizon has disturbed, outraged and frightened countless people. Following the erection of the work, police were inundated with calls from worried residents about naked men standing on the edges of skyscrapers. Confusion reigned at street level, too: the sculpture on the Queen's Road Central footpath was deemed an 'obstruction' and temporarily barricaded by the Highways Department after a complaint from a member of the public (Ross, 2016).

Figure 4: Antony Gormley's Event Horizon (adapted from British Council, 2016; Johnston, 2014).

DISCUSSION: INVESTIGATING THE AUDIENCE OF PUBLIC ART

Public art is beginning to shift attention away from the artists and their works towards a discussion of how audiences participate in art creation. Artists may no longer take the role of 'spokespeople' to express specific interests, but rather provide opportunities for the audience to participate in art. However, although the study of public art acknowledges the audience (Hall and Smith,

2005), few researchers have attempted to investigate the audience of public art or the significance of public art to the daily life of the urban public.

Divergence of Information

Although art can break through the gullies, walls and obstacles that other means of communication cannot penetrate, some differences in meaning will still arise. Even if important aesthetic education is carried out, people will receive different information from art, and not necessarily what the artists intend to convey. There are a thousand Hamlets in a thousand people's eyes. Different people interpret the same artwork differently and use the same artwork for different purposes. As Dewey said, even artists can see different meanings in their own works. If there is room in a work of art for different interpretations, we can conclude that people will tend to disagree on what it aims to convey.

Public art is a special kind of art compared with works placed in museums and art galleries. First, in the museums or gallery context, the importance of works of art is taken for granted. Those who visit such places will have higher levels of aesthetic education, and they will pay greater attention to the artistry. Thus, museums and art galleries engender 'an aesthetic emotion whose specialness is defined, in part, by its separateness from everyday life' (Fleming and Goldman, 2005). Public art, placed in the public space, does not engender this emotion. Second, public art must face the public, and the public must be its audience. Although people can choose not to go to art galleries or museums, public works of art are placed in public spaces, and the public are inevitably affected. Even if it offends them, they cannot avoid seeing the artwork, and they have the right to criticise anything that hinders or annoys them in the public sphere. Public art is not only for artists to express themselves but also for the particularity of the place where they are placed, making it easier and more widely affect the public. Therefore, artists should be more cautious when creating public art to convey information and communicate.

Rediscovering the Value of Audience

The two words' public' and 'art' reflect an unknown relationship between the artist and the audience. Most public art focuses on attempts to 'read', 'unpack' or 'deconstruct' the meaning of art products (Hall, 1997; Miles, 2005). Whilst these approaches offer 'sophisticated methods of saying a great deal about the art they can say very little about the public', missing the crucial and complex audience dimension (Hall and Robinson, 2001). The audience have their own thoughts and actions; they are not a passive group that simply accepts public works.

When art is placed in a public space, it needs to face an audience with independent thinking ability (Siu, 2007). The information transmitted by public art and the public's understanding and feedback constitute information communication. However, the inequality or difference in experiences, information, knowledge of art and life between the artist and the audience will cause misunderstandings in information communication. Unfortunately, poor information communication can lead to negative social effects and

consequences. Therefore, artists need to pay more attention to the communicative ability of public art, rediscover the value of their audience and strive to co-create value with the audience.

CONCLUSION

This paper starts by examining the relationship between public art and public space, traces the essence of art, explores the differences between public art and art in museums and art galleries, and attempts to draw artists' attention to their audience through case studies. As public art develops, the role of artists is constantly changing. Artists should re-examine the significance and value of their audience (like aesthetic values, moral values, etc.) and encourage the audience to participate in open dialogue between different communities from their own perspective, sharing and negotiating the design of public art. By recognising the value of the audience of public art, and carefully examining the audience, their experience and the meaning they construct, artists can correctly convey the true core of their artistic work to the audience. Only in this way can they make public art that realises its full environmental, economic and social value.

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