



Deconstructing *public artopia*: Situating public-art claims within practice

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ABSTRACT

This paper problematises *public artopia*, in other words the collection of claims in academic literature concerning the allegedly physical-aesthetic, economic, social, and cultural-symbolic roles of art in urban public space. On the basis of interviews with public-art producers (artists, public officials, investors, and participating residents) in a flagship and a community-art project in Amsterdam, we analyse the situatedness of their public-art claims according to actors' roles, geographical context, and time. The research suggests that public-art theory and policy suffer from three deficiencies. Theoretical claims about public-art and policy discourse feature, first, a failure to recognise different actors' perspectives: claims fail to locate situated knowledges that are intrinsically (re)constituted by actors' roles articulating with one another in time and space. Second is the lack of geographical contextuality: claims do not elaborate appropriately on distinct discourses about art projects' spatial settings. Third is the lack of temporal perspective. Claims neglect the practice of public-art realisation: that is, the evolution of claims and claim coalitions over the time horizon of the art projects: preparation, implementation, and evaluation.

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1. Introduction: situating public art

The term *public art* designates artworks, either permanent or temporary, commissioned for sites with open public access. These are located outside conventional [museological or private] locations and settings (Miles, 1997, p. 5): city squares, parks, buildings' exteriors, and infrastructural sites such as railway stations, roundabouts, and airports. Public art is a visual practice in that it integrates, represents, and communicates vision, image, and space. Dynamism in the arts sector has resulted in a multiplication of styles and media of expression in cities' public spaces; "public art is an expanding practice that continues to incorporate every medium and discipline from painting to new media, sculpture to design, architecture to performance" (Cartiere and Willis, 2008, p. 15).

The multifaceted nature of public art has induced a debate about the *publicness* and the *artfulness* of public art (Finkelpearl, 2001; Kwon, 2004). Massey and Rose (2003, p. 19), for example, believe that "for an artwork to be public, negotiation between social differences has to be part of what the artwork does. If negotiation among diverse social identities is not invited, then the artwork is not public". Chang (2008) believes that in questioning the publicness of art, one must deal with the nature of artistic creativity that he collectively terms "'artfulness' and the problem of

'ostentatious spatiality'" (Chang, 2008, p. 1925). He questions the creative role of artists in society by asserting that "seldom is art created, commissioned, and installed in public spaces unfettered by utilitarian demands" (Chang, 2008, p. 1925). Apart from such discussion about publicness and artfulness, there is also debate about the power and gender dimensions of public art (see Deutsche, 1996; Massey and Rose, 2003; Rendell, 2000; Staeheli and Mitchell, 2007).

So public art is a domain of contested terminology; "public art can be read in different ways and its uses to beautify the city or celebrate its reimagineering do not necessarily enjoy universal consensus" (Sharp et al., 2005, p. 1001). On that note, academics, artists, social agents, policymakers, and the like are usually not discussing the same subject at all.

The aim of this paper is to problematise *public artopia*: the loose collection of claims in academic literature about the allegedly physical-aesthetic, economic, social, and cultural-symbolic roles of art in urban public space, which reflect public art's notional, potentially fetishised, and ill-defined geographical contextuality. Cosgrove (2005) indicates that claims concerning contemporary-art's role in urban space have attracted a surge of interest from geographers (see Hall, 2003a,b; Hall and Robertson, 2001; Massey and Rose, 2003; Miles, 1997, 2007; Robertson and Richards, 2003; Sharp et al., 2005). Notwithstanding, geographers have scarcely researched the mental representations of public-art producers about the roles of public art in urban space, although the empirical studies of Hall (2003a,b), Roberts and Marsh (1995), Selwood (1995) and Sharp et al. (2005) are important exceptions in that respect. Dynamics in public-art production discourse are closely connected

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with spatial rescaling processes as reflected in urban governance (see Brenner, 2004) and local and regional identity formation (see Harvey, 1989; Lefebvre, 1991; Zukin, 1995). Cities are positioned and defined in changing spatial and sociocultural contexts. Within that purview, urban planners use selection mechanisms for creating and negotiating geographical images and anti-images, also by means of public art (see Zebracki, 2010). Studies on public art or visual culture in general may reveal the geographical discourse of the producers of cultural images. These images also affect the mental representations that users of geographical knowledge, which is inherent in these images, develop about space and place. Hence, public-art research could open a wider debate about the differentiated ways in which visual culture is represented by both producers and users of urban imagery.

On the basis of findings from interviews with public-art producers – artists, public officials, investors, and participating residents – we analyse the situatedness of their public-art claims in an attempt to deconstruct *public artopia* in the context of public-art practice. The two case-study projects involved are both located in the city of Amsterdam. The first is *Virtual Museum Zuidas* (see Map 1), a city-centre flagship-art project targeted at international exposure in the booming Zuidas (South Axis), the business district branded the ‘Financial Mile’ (Salet and Majoor, 2005, p. 116). The second case-study is *Face Your World* (see Map 1), a community-art project aimed at enhancing social cohesion in the ethnically-diverse neighbourhood of Slotervaart.

We are interested in situating the public-art producers’ personal perceptions of the role of art in urban space, taking into account differentiation in the role and expertise of actors, the types and locations of art projects, and perceptions over time. In so doing, Donna Haraway’s concept of situated knowledges, epistemologically implying ‘feminist objectivity’ (1991, p. 188), is helpful. This concept provides a conceptual framing mechanism for a ‘partial perspective’ to public-art claims, which is not “[from] above, from nowhere, from simplicity’, but from ground level, from somewhere and from complexity” (Haraway, 1991, p. 195). Barnes (2000, p. 743) asserts that “situated knowledge is embodied in that it is grounded in the physicality of specific human bodies and their artefacts,” hence in public art, too. Our phenomenological challenge is to provide insight into public-art practice and public-art producers’ concrete experiences to situate public-art claims in ac-

tors’ perspectives and geographical as well as temporal dimensions. These situated knowledges are inherent in what we term the *public artscape*. This *scape* signifies a social relationality in which meanings of public artworks and intrinsically social differences are negotiated. According to Massey and Rose (2003), this negotiation process defines ‘publicness’, “and it therefore happens in spaces where social differences are very often evident: in streets, shops, parks, malls, markets, squares, playgrounds, car parks, stations” (Massey and Rose, 2003, p. 6).

In this paper, we first outline theoretical claims about public art’s roles, including some of the main critiques of such claims. Second, we discuss the methodological issues of our empirical work. Third, we consider the findings on public-art claims conveyed within our case-study locations (*Virtual Museum Zuidas* and *Face Your World*). Fourth, we discuss the implications of this study with regard to *public-artopian* claims of urban planning.

2. Public artopia: theoretical claims, critiques, and implications

International cross-discipline literature on public-art policy and practice reveals that planners’ urban ambitions and the corresponding public-art policy and practices have changed in Western Europe since 1945, particularly since the 1980s’ ‘renaissance’ of public art (Hall and Robertson, 2001). Public art has provided a symbol for revitalising initiatives of European and North American cities (Bovaird, 2005). With a repositioning of the role of the state, the commissioning of public art has involved public-private partnerships and sometimes the private sector exclusively. Cosgrove (2005) states that public authorities and private parties have both promoted public art in landscaping, commissioned murals and sculptures; they have recognised the significance of visual images, including public art, in advertising, promoting, place selling, and place attachment (Fleming, 2007; Knight, 2002). New social and economic claims – public art for social cohesion, urban boosterism, and city marketing – have been added to the traditional claims of aesthetics and supporting collective memory embodied in statues, memorials, and so forth. Furthermore, public art and public-art policy in cities have become more differentiated in terms of assumed scales of impact on the quality of urban space: from flagship-art projects designed for international profiling and exposure in spaces of flow such as urban centres and business districts to community-art projects focusing on social engagement and social cohesion at the neighbourhood level (see Hall, 2003a,b; Lacy, 1995; Miles, 1997; Remesar, 2005a).

The academic literature features various claims about the contribution made to urban space by public art. According to Hall (2003a), from the 1980s onwards it has been both prominent and controversial in urban upgrading; public art is considered capable of legitimising as well as criticising prevailing urban developments. It has been the subject of contrasting critical literatures from artists, art experts, cultural theorists, urban and cultural geographers, and experts from cognate disciplines (Hall, 2003a; Miles, 1997, 2003; Moody, 1990; Policy Studies Institute, 1994; Roberts and Marsh, 1995; Selwood, 1995; Sharp et al., 2005). The following public-art claims are primarily drawn from research by Hall (2003a,b), and are all reflected in the work of Miles (1997), Remesar (2003, 2005a), Selwood (1995) and Sharp et al. (2005).

- (a) *Physical-aesthetic claims* – enhancing aesthetic quality: improving the attractiveness of a place and thereby encouraging more intensive use of a public space; upgrading the visual or aesthetic quality of place, and turning a former anonymous place into a physical reference point (see Goldstein, 2005; Hein, 1996, 2006; Rendell, 2006; Sharp et al., 2005).



Map 1. Localities of *Virtual Museum Zuidas* (VMZ) and *Face Your World* (FYW) in the city of Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

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