

Stuck Between Disciplines – Notes on Public art discourse in 2012
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ABSTRACT (100 words)

In surveying where the field of public art practice and research currently stands in 2011, there remains a deficit of critical discourse - what some would call "theory", and others research-oriented approaches to urban public art practice and interpretation. Furthermore, public art has yet to mature as a field and begin to take account of its own histories, both past and present. In this essay, I claim that in order to understand public art, it is necessary to investigate the space that informs it, that of public space. It is necessary to dig into more complex territory to do this.

This article contained images, which can be seen online using the above weblink.

STUCK BETWEEN DISCIPLINES - NOTES ON PUBLIC ART DISCOURSE, 2011

By Rebecca Hackemann

My decision to plant a wheat field in Manhattan instead of building just another public sculpture grew out of a long-standing concern and need to call attention to our misplaced priorities and deteriorating human values.

Agnes Denes, 1982

[...] I have from time to time imagined that a psychoanalysis of architecture might be possible - as if architecture were on the couch so to speak - that would reveal, by implication, and reflection, its relationship with its 'subjects'.

Anthony Vidler, 2001

In surveying where the burgeoning field of public art practice and research currently stands today in 2011, there is - still - a deficit of critical discourse, that is, what some would call “theory”, and others research-oriented approaches¹ to urban public art practice and interpretation. Furthermore, public art has yet to mature as a field and begin to take account of its own histories, both past and present. In this essay, I claim that in order to understand public art, it is necessary to investigate the space that informs it, that of public space. It is necessary to dig into deeper, more complex territory and research oriented approaches do this. In contrast, most of the new enthusiasm that has developed around public art as a practice in the United States in the past five years is focused on description, instrumentality and process or administrative challenge. There is also a lack of permanent public art that is both critical and conceptual. Eva Diaz² in the “Mind the Gap” catalogue essay for Smack Mellon states,

[...] “generally art that has been executed through legitimate channels does not address itself to concerns that stem in any sort of self-reflexive manner, from urban culture”.

There was great enthusiasm and attention paid to public art in the 1990's, both in the United States and in Europe. In 1991 Mary Jane Jacobs mounted her “Places with a Past”, a public art exhibition in Charleston, NC, which unlike most public art in the regions of the United States allowed for non-resident artists to be funded as well. The exhibition (to use an ‘indoor’ term) was the first to be documented in a book by Rizzoli and was hailed by the *New York Times* and *Artforum* as one of their top ten shows that season. The momentum was there. Of course there were many more innovative public art projects, notably those curatorially led by The Public Art Fund, Creative Time, Creative Capital, LMCC and in the UK the *Fourth Plinth, Norwich East*, to name just a few. But as Jane Rendell asserts in 2008 “it is disappointing to note that the potential of public art [...] has not really developed in North America in the way we might have hoped for.” Mary Jane Jacob’s ground breaking curatorial practice and ideals, most notably that public art’s role could shift from serving the interests of inner city

¹ By research oriented approaches I mean peer reviewed research. To borrow from Sir Christopher Frayling’s terms (for design) this consists of research into public art, research through public art and research for public art. See Peter Lunenfeld and Frayling, as well as *The Routledge Companion to Research in the Arts*, 2010

² (Diaz)

redevelopment to improving the quality of life of citizens, has perhaps not been completely fulfilled; or perhaps it has, and the art world has simply not taken note. Indeed Josephine Berry Slater, in a book launch of “No Room to Move” at Slade Research Center in London echoes that Jacob’s great sentiments have been forgotten³. Rendell aptly points out the difference between the ‘fine’ art that is critically acclaimed and shown for example in Chelsea, Williamsburg, Brooklyn and uptown today, and the ‘public’ art found outdoors in the city of New York. Having observed the same myself, I question what the cause and nature of this difference is. What power structures and theories shape and inform urban public space and it’s nature differently to the space of a white cube? While there has been a surge in critical writing and review on land art or earth works from the early 90’s onwards, notably by Yates McKee, Suzaan Boettger and William Fox to name a few⁴, there is little critical discourse on urban public works, especially that which is permanent. For example, in a long paper on the artists Allora and Calzadilla, Yates McKee analyses and makes links between their temporary public artworks, that have roots in radical architecture, and Robert Smithson and early Dennis Oppenheim’s work. He is thus connecting older work with newer work and suggesting an historical trajectory:

“Allora and Calzadilla’s Land Mark extends the projects outlined by Smithson and later by Morris, displacing an aesthetics of purification with a critical attention to the violent historicity of landscape.”⁵

There are few texts that do this for permanent or long term projects in the United States. There are also a few contemporary artists who build upon the legacy of well-known urban public artworks who nonetheless have not been written about or linked together. The reasons for a lack of criticality (with)in and about urban public work (especially permanent public work) are many, yet it is something that can be noted again and again⁶. I will attempt to explore possible causes for this, as well as map out where public art is at this moment as a discipline or field perhaps, with a few *Häppchen* of philosophical inputs at the end, to be seen as a provocation, a question and a call for more, a laying out of possible paths for the future.

Firstly, public art as a field has not yet been defined clearly enough and this may be the cause of its nomadic existence as a field. As Jane Rendell’s book’s title and chapter headings imply, public art sits between Art and Architecture. Public art borders perhaps more interestingly on other fields such as architecture, urban studies, social geography and spatial theory, rather more than it relates to contemporary art analysed in a vacuum as an object in the context of art history. Public art is often discussed at the edges of other larger themes as well, such as site specificity, radical architecture, feminist art, activist art, socially based art practice, or as part of the larger oeuvre of a famous artist⁷. Certainly several excellent histories on public art works have emerged in recent years, notably by Tom Finkelpearl, Senie, Krause-Knight, Miwon Kwon and Suzanne Lacy. These are however mostly descriptive works, without digging deeper into analysis, evaluation and criticism. One might also ask, what has changed in permanent installations since the publication of these books? There is a wide spectrum of work spanning from permanent to temporary work; earthworks or land art to works that sit on private land or public land; street art or graffiti, works that are staged for a short time and then re-presented to an art world audience in the form of documentation later on, or works that do not exist as objects at all, but rather consist of an action, such as the act of renaming a street for example⁸ or distributing radio waves⁹. Early monuments are firmly anchored within texts of art history and art historical texts always prominently feature architectural history.

3 (Berry Slater) No room to move audios

4 [Simply visit Robert Smithson’s Bibliography \(http://www.robertsmithson.com/bibliography/books.html\)](http://www.robertsmithson.com/bibliography/books.html)

5 (McKee)

6 Wilsher makes similar claims in Art Monthly, issue 133, 2009

7 Jim, Turell, Michael Heizer, Robert Smithson, Oppenheim

8 (*No Room to Move: Radical Art and the regenerate City*)

9 (Diaz), neuroTransmitter, the artist distribute mediumwave radio in New York, or in 1982, The Memorial Artyard Monumental show.

Architectural history has however since Modernism broken off into its own field and produced its own histories and sub-fields, University Departments and discourses. Open any contemporary art history book and there is generally no architecture contained within it.

Perhaps in this breaking off, public art as a field was left aside as an orphan, hanging between or at the edges of many disciplines, including social geography, spatial studies, fine art and urban design/architecture. This makes it even harder to gather public art under one umbrella as a field in its own right. Anthony Vidler notes (referring to Lefebvre's spatial theories) that

"[...] the boundary lines between the arts [are] quite strictly drawn, and with no such overarching theory of space, the transgression of art and architecture takes on a definite critical role. Thus, as I point out on the chapter on Mike Kelley, sculpture does not simply 'expand its field', but rather takes in the theoretical practices of architecture in order to transform its field."¹⁰

Vidler goes on to note that architecture in turn consciously moves to art and then rejects certain architectural strategies, such as functionalism for example.

Secondly, while these issues concerning definitions remain to be resolved and taken apart further elsewhere, they also lead to further enquiries. Where for instance, are the bigger questions surrounding public art (and public space) - what it means, how it means and how it is read, and by whom, where? New (or orphaned) fields need to ask these questions and answer them - first in an academic context, then elsewhere. In assessing the "where" question, the art press and art critics often overlook this burgeoning field of public art, whether legitimate or not, and in the United States at least are often reviewed in other sections of the popular press, for example the *Metro* section of the New York Times and not by art critics. A search for public art in *Artforum* brings up very few examples, mostly short and descriptive. Again the cause of this is manifold. In short, public art needs to be written about and research enquiries need to be made into it as a field. The event of new academic journals such as "PAD" journal (Routledge) and the journal "Art in the Public Sphere" (intellect) is promising news. Unlike urban art works, earthworks and land art have been widely paid tribute to and exhibited in the mainstream art world, if not in the form of drawings, then film and photography.¹¹ Earthworks and land art have also been written about and reviewed within the conventional art world.

The most interesting rigorous research orientated work on public space, urban culture (and anti-plop art) work in the public sphere has come from other fields, namely architecture and design. Projects included in books such as "No Room to Move"¹² in the UK, exemplify a large range of activity that moves towards social engagement with public space and the public, as well as works that are inclusive and generated by the public. Assata Shakur's "Living in Project Row Houses" is an example of this, as is Ron Jensen's Phoenix Solid Waste Management Facility. Anthony Duram's *Guggenheim Walthamstow* in which he placed a billboard design saying just that, next to a building site, spoofed the Guggenheim Museum's ambitions for global spread. Likewise the project *Amateur Human* by Karolina Sobecka¹³, which comprises a series of accessories that attach to cars in order to measure their pollution by changing colour, for all to see. Michael Rakowitz's paraSITE¹⁴ piece consists of a homeless shelter tent that taps into the exhaust fans of buildings in New York and was later acquired by MOMA and

10 (Vidler), pg 11.

11 The Robert Smithson Retrospective organized by Eugenie Tsai for the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, later travelled to the Whitney Museum of American art et al, consisted of drawings of photographs.

12 (*No Room to Move: Radical Art and the regenerate City*)

13 (Sobecka) 2010

14 <http://michaelrakowitz.com/projects/parasite/>

exhibited in the design section. The source behind much cutting edge work often has to do with the alleviation of regulations - as Anne Pasternak, the Director of Creative Time explains:

"Artists aren't the only ones liberated in the process; so too are government officials. If a work is intended to be permanent, people believe it has to please everyone—or at least not offend anyone. With temporary works, elected officials can simply wait for it to go away."¹⁵

The point however is, that the art world has not taken enough notice and these works have not been acknowledged enough in the contemporary art world and by art critics. The reasons for this may seem obvious to some - the works are in their very nature in direct opposition to commercially based gallery work and some of the artists openly disavow the commercial art world. Moreover, some even see themselves more as activists, than as fine artists. In addition, public art that is cutting edge is often political and political art (in the US at least) is not sought after or popular within the mainstream art world.

If public art is to be subject to critical inquiry, interpretation and discourse in academia and beyond, and if it is to be understood better, we also need to understand what informs it, and that is public space. Perhaps this entails learning/creating the language(s) of public space, just as conceptual art has a language that audiences have come to know and explore. Public space is informed by social activity. According to Henri Lefebvre's canonical theory, space operates within a trialectical model and is made of three concepts- spatial practice, representations of space and representational spaces. Lefebvre states, that space is not only defined by what is projected onto it by us, but space itself influences us as well. Rosalyn Deutsche asks "what does it mean for space to be public?" Public in the United States is intensely intertwined with the First Amendment, Freedom of Speech and individual's have a right to public space. Michael Sorkin¹⁶, in 'The New American City and the End of Public Space' asserts, that public space, that is physical space owned by the city, is being sold off to private real estate developers, and that the public square has been replaced by shopping malls. As Mike Davis states:

The American City is systematically being turned inward. The "public" spaces of the new mega structures and supermalls have supplanted traditional streets and disciplined their spontaneity. Inside malls, office centers, and cultural complexes, public activities are sorted into strictly functional compartments under the gaze of private police forces.¹⁷

Malls are also the primary "hang out" place for teenagers who cannot drink but can drive, often at age 15. How is this trend in turn reflected or can it be reflected in actual works that remain in a town square, in a mall? These issues are played out and addressed in the United States in activist movements such as the Bike Lane Liberation Clowns, organized by ties Up! New York. On August 20th 2005, several bike riders dressed as clowns began the "Bike Lane Liberation Day" and placed pretend parking tickets that cited actual New York laws, that impose a fine on any car parked in a bike lane. The tickets resembled real tickets. Shepard notes that

For the Time's Up Liberation Clowns, [...], play was a way to move beyond staking out community soaces towards expanding the way we understand, use, define and defend public spaces.¹⁸

However in the United States at least, and there are many more examples of such activism, these interventions are not framed in the artworld in any significant way. The participants do not describe their actions as art, but as

15 (Pasternak, Anne)

16 (Sorkin)

17 (Davis, in Sorkin)

18 (Shepard)

activism.

Returning to the question at hand - what would, then constitute a deeper discourse on a public artwork's signification, it's social practice elements and potential for criticality in the public realm and public art therein? What if one were to look at public art through the ages, and find commonalities between old and new works for example? This would entail learning a new language, putting on the glasses of another discipline and combining and taking a new look to find new interpretations. Deutsche notes that for public art it is important that the urban space in which the work is situated "be understood, just as art and art institutions have been [understood], as socially constructed spaces."¹⁹ Thus perhaps an art historical context is not the only way to create or interpret public art. If public art is to emerge as it's own field, it needs to adopt new ways of being read, interpreted and created. It is therefore not enough for the contemporary art world to write about it in art historical terms, without considering it's different placement and context.

Furthermore, speaking pragmatically, public art is often not imbued with the magic of exquisite graphic design, or backed by dedicated publicity machines, in the way that gallery/museum artwork is. And with exceptions in some large cities, website design is not a priority of many public art programs - design is not always seen as paramount, despite it's great power to communicate. Many galleries have created entire departments devoted to publicizing exhibitions, just like other companies do. They employ well known outside graphic, communications and web designers, or have a member of staff devoted only to design and publicity, in order to reach their audience. In fact, because many public art programs are often run by only 1-3 people, there is little energy left after actually installing a piece to then promote it. As mentioned at the CAA conference panel on public art in 2011, the artists themselves are often relied upon to "get the word out" and clearly the art press is not targeted well enough. While some sculpture parks attached to Museums or private foundations like Storm King Sculpture Park in upstate New York, the McClelland Sculpture Park in Australia or the Socrates Sculpture Park in Long Island City, NY are clearly able to invest in websites and archives, city public art programs or programs on college campuses in the US and in the UK may not have funds to publicize, promote, design and disseminate their work, let alone find budgets to perform maintenance on them, or even write guidelines for best practice.

It is often only through public controversy after a work is installed, that it may be imbued with publicity, as Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* removal attests to.²⁰ While public art borders on many fields, it is also implemented by a variety of different kinds of channels. The lack of coherence in practices and curatorial intent makes it disparate and hard to read. Some public art comes about through 'percent for art' programs in cities, as part of larger building projects.²¹ In the United States many cities like Philadelphia (the first in 1959), Oregon (1975), New York, cities have implemented the percent for art mandate (it is not voluntary). Other work is solicited through small public art committees in towns everywhere, whose funding structures and curatorial intents vary from non-existent to extremely sophisticated. Other works are supported by the non-for-profit structure of an organisation and operate much like other art world non-profits - for example Creative Time, Creative Capital and LMCC are funded through private donations, Foundations and some public funds. Other public work is managed and solicited by Museums who partner with city departments. Most public art programs solicit through RFP's and RFQ's and follow a structure very much akin to the architectural proposal system. In large cities like New York, the Department of Transportation and Metro Transit run their own public art programs, as do many airports. Lastly without forgetting land art, it is mostly implemented on privately owned land. In addition one must not

¹⁹ (Deutsch)

²⁰ *Tilted Arc*. 1972.

²¹ Most European countries, Australia and a selection of US states and cities have these programs mandated or on a voluntary basis.

forget University campuses, whose public art programs vary greatly, according to Mankin²².

Public art is also in need of good curation, not merely implementation and maintenance. While “good” curation is debatable, as mentioned above, many programs have little to no curation. Many of the best curators in public art are located in large cities -the Fourth Plinth in London’s Trafalgar Square, Artangel in the UK and Creative Time and Creative Capital, as well as LMCC in New York and Chicago’s public art program come to mind. There are some regional public art programs with higher curatorial merit, such as NorwhichEAST in the UK, Denver, CO and Charleston, NC as well as some counties of Los Angeles and the city of San Francisco. Another way for smaller entities to have curatorial direction or expertise, is to invite outside curators with background and expertise in fine art (or urban design) to solely choose works, or to assemble a committee of arts professionals. Many public art administrators are too understaffed and underpaid to worry about curatorial intent²³. Some even see curatorial intent as a possible conflict with the dissemination of public funds. With some exceptions, the main criteria for selection as it were, are things like - ‘will the piece fall off the wall if it rains; is the pavement anchor the right one and what happens to the plastic red compound if it gets wet and will the engineer certify this drawing?’. This was echoed at the PAD CAA conference by art administrators. In other words, the concern is instrumental, practical and not philosophical and takes place in the context of (public) art history. Permanent work unfortunately exists in somewhat of a world unto itself, as many public art programs (not all) are localized. Without wanting to divert to the ‘process’ too much, this means that only local artists can receive the public funds for a given city resulting in Blakanisation. Thus regional small public art programs can be stuck rotating rosters of local artists for their funds. The result is less critically challenging work that supports artists who can make a living in a smaller town.

While these points may allude to some observed reasons for public art emerging rather slowly as a separate field with its own critical discourse, there have been some great beginnings to a deeper look at urban public art. In what follows, I cite some recent activity in the field. Miwon Kwon²⁴ explores changes in the meaning and use of the term ‘site-specificity’ from the early 1970’s onwards to the early 1990’s. At first, site specificity is linked to the geographical site and the artist’s intention, and later on to social and cultural implications of concepts of site as well. Her article *One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity*, runs from Richard Serra’s Titled Arc, to Ukeles’ “Maintenance Works washing the steps of the Wadsworth Athenium”; site specificity is the common denominator and extends beyond the public realm into indoor exhibitions in white cube spaces, with Fred Wilson’s site specific institutional critique work “Mining the Museum”. Site specificity has now come to signify an “auto-criticality” in current practice, as Miwon Kwon notes, yet many such works are not always critical works. Indeed site specificity as a theme is one of the only themes within which critical analysis and discourse on public art does take place, it however includes works that are set inside the white cube and differences in audience and the spatial context are not addressed in detail.

The relationship permanent public art has to the passage of time, for example, differentiates it from ‘indoor’ work. Decades can go by around a work of art in public. What happens to its meaning while a decade passes and how do perceptions of it change? How can artists perhaps anticipate this and draw inspiration from it? What role could technology play for it? Many temporary or socially based public works today (see below) rely heavily on graphic design and the re-presentation of their work and on well designed websites in addition to good photographic

22 (Mankin)

23 It is important to note here that public art funded with public tax payer moneys belongs to the people and that technically citizens may participate in the selection of works funded with public money. This precept was first laid out by A-i-A in 1963. (Krause-Knight).

24 (Kwon)

documentation. They have, I believe borrowed an old trick from the field of architecture, a discipline that has for a long time relied on computer graphics and photography to “defy” time. Jeremy Till in his eye opening and humorous book “Architecture Depends”²⁵ writes:

“What is at stake here is the freezing of time into a set of instant aesthetic moments. [...] In a way the reliance on the photograph is a confession of the fragility of architecture in the face of time; the shift of attention from the object itself to the representation of the object signals a retreat into a more controllable but less real realm.”

In an example of how the context of a permanent public sculpture can change around it, Rosalyn Deutsche in her article “Architecture of the Evicted” talks about permanent work. She argues that what some call the “cleaning up” of New York City in fact entailed evictions of thousands of homeless people under the pretext of “preservation” of historical forms like public sculptures in parks populated with homeless people. What happened was in her words an “expelling [of] the conflicts within it and, more importantly, those that produce it.” Wodiczko, an artist who uses historical sculptures as a canvas for his projections, is also known to be influenced by the Russian poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, who famously wrote “the streets are our brushes, the squares our palettes” - this in his case forms an apt mantra for public art practice (the squares being more suspect than the streets as locations for critical work, or perhaps not?). Returning to Deutsche, she notes that the redevelopment of areas of New York City throws “a blanket of amnesia over urban history”. Her article details the apt temporary public interventions of Krzysztof Wodiczko in bringing attention to this phenomenon, as restoring memories, addressing time and impeding one-way communication from a very old sculptural work, as well as fostering a more creative communication in the city. Wodiczko projects images onto traditional monuments all over the world. For example he projected the swastika onto the tympanum of the facade of the South Africa House in London’s Trafalgar Square (1985). He has also produced a series of ‘vehicles’, for example the *Homeless Vehicle* (1987). The artist writes that “early socialisation through patriarchal sexual discipline is extended by the later socialization through the institutional architecturalization of our bodies”²⁶. The images are of the unspoken and he in Krauss’ words “counteracts the suppression of social conflict.” His work, to me relates to the tradition of photomontage, of insertion of something out of context and thus draws attention to the language of public art, both permanent and temporary. It also crystalizes and embodies another trend that can be observed in urban public works - the hegemony of temporary works. The relation these works have to permanent works is that they often form a critique of permanent work. In Wodiczko’s case the two can’t live without each other and form an embodied contradiction in one piece, a three dimensional montage, that results in third associations on the part of the viewer. In his 2009 temporary work, he created a ‘wearable TV’ for local residents to have their face projected onto architectural facades. This work however is less politically charged than his older works. A record of the projected performance, that also lives on in the memory of residents long after the projections have been turned off, remains. I wonder, if it is possible to create such exciting critical public art, that is also permanent. Most critical public works²⁷ like this one, too exist either on privately owned land, or are temporary²⁸ and are recorded to be re-presented later inside traditional art spaces or on websites. These works are only experienced in their own ‘habitat’ for a short time.

Why is it that permanent work is on the whole less cutting edge or challenging? Most would say it has to do with

25 (Till), 2009

26 (Wodiczko and Sharpe)

27 For example Smithson’s the Spiral Jetty (1971), Andy Goldsworthy’s work, Alex Villar’s video recorded insertions (2006-9), or the artist team Neurotransmitter’s radio wave performances (2006), Ann Bray’s 1985 “White Out” to name a few.

28 In the field of public art temporary can mean any amount of time from one day to a few months. Permanent public art commonly stays in one place for many years, decades and/or indefinitely. Because of this it is subject to greater restrictions, for funding or maintenance and weather proof material.

the underlying mechanisms and patterns of power structure and processes associated with permanent work. Permanent works have to conform to a different set of rules - and by-laws. But what if these were to change? What if cities hired some of those public art curators now graduating, or fielded out the responsibility of a public art program to non-profit organizations? One reason why many gallery artists often do not 'step into' the public realm is that the artist is faced with enormous learning curves, as well as paperwork if they do not have the support of an arts organisation. Many art commissioners do not obtain permits for artists after they write the grant check, and leave artists to obtain liability insurance and permits from city agencies. At the recent CAA conference Creative Capital presentation it occurred to me, that these are new forms of 'Galleries'. The artists are provided with institutional backing, represented, backed up and supported, for work in the public realm. They are not only handed a check, but also helped in navigating this difficult field of practice.

This may be the perfect place to add another question - do the processes informing public art affect the concepts and content? Given that public art is informed by different kinds of funding and permission structures, could it be a reason for the divide that Diaz and Rendell have observed (amongst others²⁹)? Perhaps because of the large amount of work involved in legitimate public work, an entire movement of renegade public work is extremely well documented and findable, thanks to the internet and small publishing houses. Wooster Projects and London Street Art are two web sites, that archive these works. Banksy is probably one of the most well known at this time, but I would count Robin Rhodes amongst these new, but uncharacteristic artists, who operate in the spirit of 'graffiti' art yet produce work that is more informed by art historical and political concerns and visually more astute. In addition 'social practice' art is driving attention to the public sphere in new ways. Projects like "Park Products" by the English collective "Public Works" and the works by Cornford and Cross (UK) and Silva and Hawke, who place familiar architectural structures into the public realm. In Silva and Hawke's case "Bus Stop" (2005), a small structure with orange plastic skin was set near a bus stop housing two benches in New York. The bus riding public immediately started to use them and because of their look, no-one intervened from a legal standpoint. The artists maintained the structure for months before dismantling it. Similarly Cornford and Cross insert objects and structures into public sphere, albeit with set funding structures behind them. Many of these new works are in fact researching artists coming from the field of architecture, and again this kind of work exists in somewhat of a vacuum and is not often linked to other public practices in articles. I must here enter an older piece that is also temporary but very powerful when seen in the context of urban space. In 1982 Agnes Denes planted a two acre wheat field in the Battery Park Landfill (the earth that was excavated to build the world Trade Center and site for many spontaneous public projects, see Finkelparl). The crop was tended to daily and harvested 4 months later. This project holds so much potential for analysis and while it was temporary, it speaks for the ways in which temporary work can inform its surroundings. In addition, while the insertion of objects or actions into space can be significant, how for example might one re-visit an interstitial project like Gordon Matta-Clarke's Fake Estates through this perspective? If Duchamp's ready-mades question the gallery space and artistic signification, could one interpret Matta-Clarke's Fakes estates as doing the for public space, by inscribing an artistic value onto otherwise insignificant, interstitial, leftover spaces (also referred to as squandrel spaces)? Zizek likens Lacan's three registers of the real, the imaginary and the symbolic to realism, modernism and postmodernism, yet how he comes to this correlation seems to lie only on the surface of signification, since realism in art history and Lacan's concept of the real, the unknowable void may be far fetched. Nevertheless he correlates on public space – the interstitial space:

First there is the reality of the physical laws one has to obey [as an architect] if a building is to stand up, [...], all the

panoply of pragmatic utilitarian considerations. Then, there is the symbolic level: the (ideological) meanings a building is supposed to embody and convey. Finally there is the imaginary space: the experience of those who will live or work in the building [...].³⁰

He goes on to note that in architecture the squandrel space, the left over spaces, often triangular. He asks “Do squandrels not then open up the space for architectural exaptations? And does this procedure not expand to buildings themselves, such as that a church or train station might be exapted into an art gallery, etc.?”³¹

I ask then, why is there so little art in these squandrel spaces?³² Is it because funders want public art to be located at tourist sites or on bonus plazas, which allow developers to build more floors in exchange for public space?³³

Other relevant observations include the following: the collapse of the art market has left many young and seasoned artists stranded for an income. Recent graduates who are less established and those artists showing with commercial Galleries have experienced the recent art market crash in harsh ways, especially in New York. Some might only be relying on the odd adjunct teaching jobs and many are now flocking to public art, if recent conversations with artist friends in New York are anything to go by. Harrowing stories of galleries selling out shows and not paying up haunt us still (we shall not name names here!) and the open access egalitarian merit based RFP and RFQ system is suddenly appealing. In some cases after being selected in an RFP, artists are paid to write a proposal - as they should be - for their time. Anne Paternak recently asserted together with Sara Reisman that public funding for art in the public realm in New York City has not decreased, and has in fact increased³⁴. In the UK, the situation in the public realm however is even worse despite increased amounts of cutting edge work, as the Arts Council of England has recently cut funding to some innovative institutions, such as Public Art Online (now taken over by ixia) in 2010.

“ Sattle (the public art organisation for Wales, formerly Cardiff Bay Arts Trust) has had its funding cut completely; the Regional Development Agencies, also until recently a source of funding for public art, have been dissolved.”³⁵

In addition, amazingly enough, bronze sculptures are being stolen in England. Thefts of these sculptures have gone up 500% from 2006 - 2009 and bronzes are being melted down for cash by what might be desperate yet resourceful individuals. A Henry Moore was melted down and sold for a mere 1500 pounds in 2009 according to the Guardian Newspaper³⁶. In the context of the work of Krystof Wodiczko, these acts may appear ironically apt, yet the economic situation underlying the motivation for such acts is alarming. Likewise Glenn Ligon’s experience in New Orleans, if taken in another context, might have mistaken the melting down of a Henry Moore as a renegade form of reverse graffiti, a statement by radical artist activist, in other words, for a radical form of interventionist public art. In that case the absence of the permanent sculpture is what is left to be pondered.

Another context for debate is the formation of specialized MFA programs in public art practice, that are currently

30 (Zizek)
31 ibid
32 One peace consisting of binoculars containing stereoscopic images, sits at 2 squandrel / triangle spaces – The Urban Field Glass Project: <http://tinyurl.com/3sfpltk>
33 (Shepard)
34 (Lovell)
35 (Lovell)
36 (Townsend)

emerging in Europe and the USA. Some public art courses are bundled in with new social practice programs, for example Portland State University “Art and Social Practice Art” and Carnegie Mellon’s “art in context” program, a hybrid of public, relational and social art practices. Other Universities are taking a more targeted stance. The University of Southern California’s Roski School of Fine Arts is offering an MA in “Art in Curatorial Practices in the Public Sphere”. The Ecole Cantonale d’Art du Valais is offering an MFA in “Arts in Public Spheres” and many MFA studio programs now offer courses in public art, for example Hunter College and The New School. ICI in New York offered a program in 2010 to which curators could apply, that specialized in public art curating. Thus, not only are educational institutions thinking about all the (many) artists graduating looking for new opportunities to actually make a living, but also of the need for qualified curators in the public sphere. Judging by some of the comments on the CAA panel in 2011, there may well be a great need for well-trained curators.

One of the artist panelists at CAA had some of the most telling comments on his practice (not in the realm of instrumentality). He described the reasons for entering into the public realm, how it may or may not tie in with existing practice and how he had to justify making public art to his gallery. Apparently the gallery that represents his work initially needed much persuasion to put his public works on their website. The good news is, that they did display it and it did not do any ‘harm’ it seems. Perhaps it’s image is not that bad after all, perhaps they are many ways of changing the ‘untrendy’ image of public art by incorporating it into the well designed confines of a clean website with lots of white space³⁷.

The recent Smack Mellon exhibition and a conference held by Creative Time in 2009 and 2010 in New York City (notably and brilliantly archived online as video) are worth noting here. While the Smack Mellon exhibition (2006) concentrated on temporary art that took place in left over interstitial architectural spaces, the accompanying catalogue essay written by Eva Diaz explored the work appropriately in the context of social geography and urban theory and history. The work of Alex Villar in which he inserts himself into leftover architectural spaces is built on Gordon Matta-Clark’s *Fake Estates* project of 1973, in which he purchased left over triangles of land all over New York. Similarly the Creative Time conferences³⁸ included speakers from different countries and fields such as Eyal Weizmann, editor at Cabinet Magazine and Professor at Goldsmiths Architecture Department in London and Anne Pasternak, one of the more insightful speakers. Many artist collectives that work in the public realm were present, including Superflex, who insert themselves into economic structures, such as farming in Brazil, F.E.A.S.T, who practice fundraising for public projects modeled on church fundraisers by cooking and holding dinners. Many collectives³⁹ however had more of a reactive stance in their purpose and mission and unlike the collectives in the UK, These were coming from an activist art background, but likewise advocated a ‘rejectional’ position on the conventional gallery system. The event of socially engaged art within temporary works is a notable trend here and is referred to in different terms - “conversational art” as Homi Bhabha⁴⁰ calls it, “dialogue-based-work” (Finkelpearl) and “new genre” public art coined by Suzanne Lacy⁴¹, which is also in the title of her book. Very few collectives or artists at the conference even employed the term public art, which may tell us something - it points once again to a disparity within this field. However since the conference was completely open in terms of themes (it appears speakers chose their own topic), many presenters did not go into detailed discussions on public art practice and it’s signification or relation to social or cultural space, but

37 I am referencing the design term white space, the space of which is not actually white, only empty.

38 *Creative Time Summit, 1 and 2, Revolutions in Public Practice*. <http://creativetime.org/programs/archive/2010/summit/WP/>: Creative Time New York, 2010

39 for a comprehensive list, visit: <http://creativetime.org/programs/archive/2010/summit/WP/category/all-presentations2010/>

40 (Bhabha) 1998

41 (Lacy)

simply described different projects or their own curatorial process. This made it almost too open, with interesting sections hard to locate later on and many presenters digressing into whatever interested them at the time, which may not always have been to do with public practice, as the title suggested. Other presentations centered more around social art practice, again not public practice as a whole, but insightful examples were nevertheless abundant⁴². What followed was the opportunity to discuss online. Aside from setting an example of including a wider community - ie anyone with an internet connection could participate and watch the conference, it also opens up the dialogue for public art to be discussed from a world perspective. In this Creative Time was ground breaking in it's approach, contrasting sharply with other conference practices. It also archives the conference publicly and more importantly makes it accessible to anyone free, on an ongoing basis.

In conclusion, in many ways public art as a discourse is in a similar position to photography when it was in transition from being a derivative field of 'real' fine art into its own historical context⁴³. It was not always included in the history of art (and sometimes still isn't) but has now developed into it's own field within fine art and has continued to write and re-write it's own histories. Where can public art as a field go from here? How can permanent public art be re-thought, re-seen and re-visited rigorously and through traditional or practice led artistic research? It's problem, that has to do with it's diversity of practices and definitions, it's special relationship with time and space, as well as being stuck between the disciplines of architecture, urban studies, spatial studies and art, the populist versus high art interests, is one that by it's very nature could yield interesting research. I am curious about how the incorporation of urban design theory, of spatial theory and social geography can inspire historians, critics, artists and researchers to produce even more critical work, as well as thought and perspective on old and new public practices.

Public art needs to be tackled through an understanding of the problems that surround it as a potential field in it's own right. Few (I include myself) advocate for a possible psychoanalytical approach to public art in public space (see introductory quote by Vidler) and for research through and of public art. A Freud-Lacanian approach to research, as Malcolm Quinn asserts, assumes the researcher and/or artist as *not* the knowledgeable one, but rather "[...] the problem teaches and is thus placed in a dominant position in relation to existing [art] practice."⁴⁴ Anthony Vidler uses one of Lefebvre's⁴⁵ three types of spatial differentiations, that of representational space, namely the space created by artists, critics or architects. He notes that it is "marked by the one spatial practice left unanalysed by Lefebvre; that of post-psychoanalytical imaginary, as it seeks to trace out the site of anxiety and disturbance in the modern city."⁴⁶

I close with a quote by Wodzicko⁴⁷ who believes that leaving public work in the public sphere for too long is undesirable. These are his instructions for his projectionist:

"Slide projectors must be switched off before the image loses its impact and becomes vulnerable to the appropriation by the buildings as a decoration."

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42 www.creativecapital.org

43 In Britain this would have been in the late 1970's, in America in the 1940's, when MOMA started it's photography collection.

44 (Quinn)

45 (Lefebvre)

46 (Vidler)

47 (Harrison and Wood)

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