Art and Public Space: Questions of Democracy

Rosalyn Deutsche

I have said that the survival and extension of the public space is a political question. I mean by that that it is the question that lies at the heart of democracy. Claude Lefort, “Human Rights and the Welfare State”

Judging by the number of references to public space in contemporary aesthetic discourse, the art world is “taking democracy seriously.” Allusions to public space have multiplied over the last decade along with a highly publicized growth in public art commissions, and even the most ingenuous accounts of public art agree: public space is inextricably linked to democratic ideals. When, for instance, arts administrators and city officials formulate criteria for placing “art in public places,” they routinely employ a vocabulary that invokes, albeit loosely, the tenets of both direct and representative democracy: Are the artworks for “the people?” Do they encourage “participation?” Do they serve their “constituencies?” Public art terminology frequently promises a commitment not only to democracy as a form of government but to a general democratic spirit of equality as well: Do the works relinquish “elitism?” Are they “accessible?”

When it comes to public art, neoconservative critics, no strangers to elitism in artistic matters, are also out there with the people. Normally suspicious of democratic “excess”—activism, demands for political participation, challenges to governmental and moral authority—which, they believe, makes society un governable and endangers democratic rule by elites, neoconservatives nonetheless attack what they call the public artist’s “arrogance” and “egoism” in the name of “access”—the people’s access to public space.1

Opinions on the most famous recent controversy over public sculpture—the removal of Richard Serra’s Tilted Arc from New York’s Federal Plaza—also centered, at least for opponents of the work, on the issue of access. “This is a day for the people to rejoice,” declared William Diamond of the federal government’s Art-in-Architecture Program on the day Tilted Arc was torn down, “because now the plaza returns rightfully to the people.”2 Supporters of the sculpture, however, testifying at the hearing convened to decide Tilted Arc’s fate, defended the work in the name of democracy, upholding the artist’s right
to free expression or portraying the hearing itself as destructive of democratic processes.\textsuperscript{3} Others, reluctant to take sides in debates like these, seek to resolve conflicts between artists and the users of public space “democratically,” by means of “community involvement” in the selection of works of art or through other procedures that “integrate” artworks with the spaces they occupy. Still, despite a preoccupation with such problems, the prevailing categories that shape public art debates allow little interrogation of the definition of public space, let alone of democracy, with which, everyone says, public space is somehow intertwined.

Yet no topic is more urgent today than democracy, which can be taken seriously in more ways than one.\textsuperscript{4} The emergence of this topic in the art world, whether in a nascent state or in more sophisticated efforts to formulate the terms of democratic aesthetic practices, corresponds to an extensive eruption and diffusion of struggles over the meaning of democracy, in political theories, social movements, and cultural practices. The question of democracy has, of course, been raised internationally by decisive challenges to African regimes of racial oppression, Latin American dictatorships, and Soviet-style state socialism. Widely touted as a “triumph for democracy,” these events have, to be sure, fostered the use of “democracy” as a political catchword, but they have simultaneously cast doubt on this rhetoric, posing the question of democracy as, precisely, a question. For some leftists, uncertainty springs from the discredit brought upon totalitarian regimes by democratic protests and from the failure of proposals for “concrete democracy” to appreciate fully the significance of ideas about human rights. Clearly, however, rejection of socialist bloc orthodoxy is no reason to remain content with “actually existing democracy.”\textsuperscript{5} Needless to say, powerful voices in the United States seek to convert “freedom” and “equality” into slogans under which the liberal democracies of advanced capitalist countries are held up as exemplary social systems, the sole political model for societies emerging from dictatorships or actually existing socialism. But the current escalation of economic inequality to crisis proportions in Western democracies, coupled with alarming curtailments of constitutionally guaranteed rights—free speech, equal employment opportunity for minorities and women, choice to terminate pregnancy—attests to the dangers of adopting such an attitude or of localizing democracy within the sphere of government at all. In addition, new social movements that not only defend established civil rights but also declare new rights based on differentiated and contingent needs—domestic partnership rights, privacy rights for the homeless—diverge from liberal notions of abstract, universal liberties. And, simultaneously, leftist political theories such as those of Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, Claude Lefort, Slavoj Zizek, and Jean-Luc Nancy, emerging out of confrontations with totalitarianism, propose that democracy’s hallmark is the disappearance of certainty about the meaning of “the social.” Democracy then
has become a concept which, filled with uncertainties, is capable of interrupting the dominant language of democracy surrounding us. But if we try to obliterate the question at the heart of democracy and fail to think of democracy as a social practice challenging the omnipotence of power through the extension of specific rights, discourses of democracy can also be successfully mobilized to compel acquiescence in new forms of subordination.

Stuart Hall has described a mobilization of this kind and given it a name—“authoritarian populism.” Hall coined the phrase to encapsulate the contradictory features of Thatcherist Britain, a historical conjuncture, he contends, in which elements of democratic-populist and conservative discourses were combined to sanction, indeed to pioneer, shifts toward authoritarianism. Such an articulation of democracy toward the right, in which conservative forces bind popular consent to the coercive pole of state power, depends on neutralizing contradictions between the people and the power bloc, antagonisms that form the basis of popular-democratic, as distinguished from populist, movements. Hall describes, for instance, how Thatcherism placed itself on the side of “the people” by, first, collapsing a series of individual concepts—bureaucracy, statism, collectivism—that are felt (for good reason) to be oppressive, and then counterposing to them a constellation of terms—personal initiative, freedom, individualism—with which Thatcherism, though operating through the state apparatus and moving toward a coercive form of democratic politics, nonetheless identified itself. A shift from above, Hall says, is “harnessed to . . . a populist groundswell below.”

Seemingly championed by all, democracy is a complex and contested idea—really a multiplicity of ideas—that belongs intrinsically to no single political perspective or group. Rather, the language of democracy—itself a public space of debate—is open to different, even antagonistic, uses and occurs in different contexts. As I have suggested, we find it in contemporary discourse about public art where, in a manner akin to Hall’s authoritarian populism, democracy has been largely articulated in a conservative direction. For if, as so many accounts of public art contend, public space is democratic space, what future for democracy does the following definition of public art’s location foretell?

Public Places: publicly accessible areas of private developments which are . . . open and freely accessible to the public for 12 or more hours daily; or publicly accessible areas which fall under City jurisdiction.

Cited from a city report drafted in 1990 to found a “Public Art Program” in Vancouver, British Columbia, this description typifies the widely accepted concept of public space circulated today in countless aesthetic and municipal documents, most often in the context of urban redevelopment schemes. The
report’s allusions to seemingly empirical referents tell us, above all, that “public space” and “the public” exist and that their meanings can be localized within precise physical sites or determinate groups of people. But like all objectifying descriptions that purport to uncover the meaning of objects themselves, this passage disavows its own constitutive relation to those objects. Consequently, it fosters an acceptance of actually existing public spaces as, self-evidently, “public.”

Given the nature of contemporary urban transformations and of the new public sites they develop for art, this message is perilous for democracy. For redevelopment programs are profoundly authoritarian, technocratic mechanisms, transforming cities to facilitate capital accumulation and state control. They massively privatize land, destroy conditions of survival for huge numbers of city residents, insulate land-use determinations from public decision-making procedures, withdraw public resources from social services and channel them into subsidies for business, create economically and racially segregated cities, and, concomitantly, redevelop public spaces—frequently as amenities for luxury development—into corporate- and state-controlled areas.9 Within this process, the presence of “the aesthetic”—whether embodied in artworks, architectural style, urban design, or museums—helps give redevelopment democratic legitimacy since, like “the public,” “art” often connotes universality, openness, inclusion. “Public art,” combining the two terms, comes doubly burdened as a figure of universal accessibility.

Indeed, literature about public art routinely invokes these dual connotations while accepting without protest that public space is easily compatible with private property and state control. It thus implicitly supports the exclusionary rights of property as well as repressive and disciplinary power exercised in public spaces in the form of curfews, surveillance systems, policing, control through design, and forcible dispossession of users. Articles devoted to problems of public space often reconcile contradictions between the inclusionary connotations of the term “public” and exclusionary practices in urban spaces by giving “the people,” as users of public space, a traditionalist representation. The people, for instance, are cast as believers in an objective moral order, in religious notions of good and evil, or in fixed concepts of unchanging human nature. As political issues are displaced into conventional moral absolutes, authoritarian populism links up with anticrime campaigns and crusades for “public decency” which routinely provide democratic justification for the imperatives of surveillance and exclusion in public space.

Take a recent New York Times article which, in a textbook example of such unitary representations of the public, upheld what it called “The Public’s Right to Put a Padlock on a Public Space.”10 Paralleling the objectifying use of such terms as “community” and “public” in certain types of art discourse, the Times described a small, community-run park in Greenwich Village—Jackson
Park—and a group of neighborhood residents who had decided to lock the park at night. The City Parks Department, lacking the resources to close the park itself, welcomed “public” help in achieving its aim: the eviction of homeless people from the park. Support for the self-evident rightness of this goal issues from the assumption that urban spaces possess “proper” uses isolated from historical and social contingencies as well as from the broader organization of city space. But, as I have argued elsewhere, the presence of the homeless in public places today represents the most acute symptom of the conflictual and uneven social relations—not the essential, unitary needs—that transformed New York City during the most recent episode of its redevelopment in the 1980s. At that time, housing and services for huge numbers of residents no longer needed in the city economy were destroyed as, through gentrification—**including the gentrification of parks**—space was allocated to profit-maximizing development that provided the physical conditions to meet the needs of a new international economy. Yet in a negation of even the semblance of debate over the very issue it is purportedly addressing—a contest over the meaning of public parks—the *New York Times* column confidently announced that “the people who hold the keys are determined to keep a park a park.” And a housed resident of the area declared: “There is no reason for anyone to be here after dark.” At these moments, when the meaning of “public,” “use,” and “public use” are removed to a realm of objectivity located outside public debate altogether, the homeless are not only evicted from a park. Stripped of what Hannah Arendt called “the right to have rights,” they are denied access to the definition of the public, an eviction which, we might say, closes down public space.

Is it possible to speak with assurance of a public space where social groups, even when physically present, are systematically denied a voice? Does anyone “hold the key” to a public space? What does it mean to relegate groups to a sphere outside the public, to bar admittance to the discursive construction of the public, and, in this way, prohibit participation in the space of public communication? **Failure to recognize the homeless as part of the urban public; disregard of the fact that new public spaces and homelessness are both products of redevelopment; the refusal to raise questions about exclusions while invoking the concept of an inclusionary public space:** these acts ratify the relations of domination that close the borders of public places no matter how much these areas are touted as “open and freely accessible to the public for 12 or more hours daily.” Once an essential basis of coherence is attributed to public space—whether that foundation resides in the supposed possession by the public of objective moral values or in the fact of simply living, housed, in the immediate vicinity—that space is converted, and not in an economic sense alone, into private property. To the extent, that is, that the unity of public space depends on repressing—on establishing as external to “the public”—the dif-
ferences and conflicts as well as the outright injustices of urban life, public space becomes an appropriated territory subject to, rather than representing the limit of, regulatory power.

Increasingly, commentators aid this appropriation by announcing that public spaces are, indeed, contested rather than harmonious terrains but, at the same time, denying the legitimacy of these contestations. One historian, for instance, applauding the “Jackson Park solution,” noted that, although urban analysts frequently ignore such problems, “what the homeless crisis has made unavoidable, is the clash of values created around contested spaces.”¹² But describing the decision to lock Jackson Park as the “reclamation” of public space from “undesirables,” he portrays contests over urban space as a war waged between, on the one hand, representatives of public space’s real users—in this case, Friends of Jackson Park—and, on the other hand, its enemies—homeless people. Seeming to acknowledge public space as conflictual yet disavowing the social conflicts that produce space, he portrays the homeless as bringers of conflict and thus shores up, by means of an appeal to objective meanings outside public debate, a vision of an essentially coherent space that must be reclaimed.

Recently, artists and critics eager to counteract the power exercised through neutralizing ideas of the public have sought to reappropriate the concept by defining public space as a realm of political debate and public art as work that helps create such a space. For this purpose, they have sometimes had recourse to the category of “the public sphere,” a term which in its general sense designates either a set of institutions through which the state is held accountable to citizens or a space—though not necessarily a physical or empirically identifiable terrain—of discursive interaction. There, people talk to each other, generate political discourses that may be in principle critical of the state, and construct and modify political identities in encounters with others. “The public,” in contrast to, let us say, an art audience, does not exist prior to but emerges in the course of the debate.

Introduced into art discourse, the concept of the public sphere shatters mainstream categorizations of public art and also circumvents the confusions plaguing some critical discussions of public art. Transgressing the boundaries that conventionally divide public from nonpublic art—divisions, for instance, between artworks placed indoors versus those that are outdoors or between state-sponsored versus privately funded art—it excavates other distinctions which, neutralized by prevailing definitions of public space, are essential to democratic practice. The public sphere idea replaces definitions of public art as art that occupies or designs physical spaces and addresses independently formed audiences with a definition of public art as a practice that constitutes a public by engaging people in political debate. Any site can be transformed into a public or, for that matter, a private sphere. In addition, the public sphere con-
cept counteracts the most naive tendencies in art criticism to equate the public with the state, drawing a crucial distinction between the two. It also thwarts the ability to use public art—with its connotations of universal accessibility—to legitimate existing locations as democratic. With the public realm defined as an inclusionary arena of political participation, a sphere having to do with rights and social legitimacy, arts administrators can less easily ignore either the displacement of social groups from public space or the conflicts of public space while continuing to describe it as “accessible.” Finally, as Alexander Kluge emphasizes, not only is the public sphere (or, for Kluge, the oppositional public sphere) produced. It is “a factory for the production of politics.”¹³ Neither a universal domain that must be protected from politics nor, as in liberal formulations, a political realm divided from the private one of economic laws, the public sphere of discourse is invoked by leftists not only to protest the rights of private property but as the equivalent of politics itself.

Still, despite its usefulness, reference to “the public sphere” or to “the public function of art as the constitution of a political debating public” is in itself hardly sufficient to democratize public art debates. These phrases can harbor their own authoritarianism. Concepts of the public sphere vary and some of the most influential critical definitions share with conservative notions of the public a faith that fundamental interests and struggles unify the public realm. In this way, they bring privilege back into the democratic public realm. And although the concept of the public sphere distinguishes between public space and the state while eroding the depoliticizing divisions erected between public and nonpublic art, the public sphere idea can shore up other public/private dichotomies. Historically, public/private polarizations have served as a means of hierarchical differentiation in which the public sphere is appropriated by treating certain social relations as fundamentally public and devaluing others as essentially private or by defining the public sphere as a lost totality. Endowing public space with a positive identity, these acts withdraw decisions about the meaning of the public from the realm of debate and so defend, in the name of the public, a private space that avoids immersion in the political world. Given the persistence of this tendency in critical formulations of public space, there is one question of democracy we should take more seriously: Can public space be described so that it escapes appropriation altogether?

II

Now what is that point of view on everything and everybody, that loving grip of the good society, if not an equivalent of the phantasy omnipotence that the actual exercise of power tends to produce?

Claude Lefort, “Politics and Human Rights”

“Who is to define, manipulate, and profit from ‘the public’?”¹⁴ Five years ago, when Craig Owens asked this question at a panel discussion in New York City
on “the cultural public sphere,” a new sensitivity to issues of the public was emerging in the art world. Hal Foster, who had organized the panel as one of a series of discussions sponsored by the Dia Art Foundation, listed “the definition of public, historical and present” among the major, recurrent issues in contemporary art criticism. Several impulses contributed to the topicality of the public theme. Most widespread, perhaps, was the desire felt by many artists and critics to intervene in the massive economic privatization of art production and circulation that marked the 1980s—the art market explosion, attacks on public funding, growing corporate influence on exhibition policies—and to interrupt the legitimating rhetoric of “the public good” or “public protection” that, as Owens observed, frequently surrounded these events. But at least two other factors directed the art world’s attention to “the definition of public.” One was the imperative, described earlier in this essay, to create public art projects that would counteract the pseudo-public art and privatized public spaces that were vigorously promoted throughout the decade by real-estate developers and municipal governments as an arm of urban redevelopment projects. The second, seemingly remote from the concerns of what is generally called “public art,” was the exploration of the public, rather than private, nature of meaning and subjectivity that had been taking place throughout the late 1970s and 1980s in those postmodern art practices often grouped together under the heading, “the critique of visual representation.”

Each of these pursuits focuses on a different aspect of the problem of “the public” and each raises—again, differently—questions about spatial politics. Yet critics generally treat the two as isolated, even antagonistic, ventures with few points of intersection. And whereas the first project figures prominently in art-world discussions about public space, work on subjectivity in representation is virtually unrecognized there, as if it has no bearing on theories of public art or, worse, diverts attention from the “real” and most pressing problems of public space. Across the full spectrum of conventional political opinion, some art criticism fashions its categories of public art and public space by ignoring or trivializing the issues raised by such work.

No doubt, some of this neglect stems from difficulties in grasping just how critiques of representation link up with issues of public space, problems that spring, in turn, from biases in the way the terms “public” and “space” are commonly defined. By the same token, artworks that support urban social movements or explicitly criticize the character of art’s newly redeveloped urban sites seem self-evidently “public” because they bring into play more familiar, empirical concepts of publicness and spatial politics. Against official and neo-conservative explanations of redevelopment as a process which provides public space and, moreover, returns the city to the public, these works defend notions of a public realm that are formulated in distinct opposition to all facets of the privatization and bureaucratization of cities: privately owned land, technocratic and quasi-public decision-making processes insulated from public accountability, profit-maximizing development, spatial division into privileged
centers and marginalized peripheral zones, state control of public places that tolerate little resistance to officially approved uses, racially segregated neighborhoods, commodified housing.

Not surprisingly, artists hoping to offset or infiltrate the new public art industry with critical public work have sometimes allied themselves with urban social movements protesting redevelopment, gentrification, and homelessness. Two exhibitions recently mounted in Toronto and New York, The Power Plant’s “Housing: A Right” (1990) and Martha Rosler’s installations at the Dia Art Foundation, “If you lived here . . .” (1989), exemplify such alliances and demonstrate a twofold relationship between art and spatial politics. Each project combined urban and aesthetic discourses in support of struggles that oppose the provision of housing as an interest—profit—and that fight, instead, to establish housing as a right. As responses to redevelopment, to the global reorganization of capital accumulation for which redevelopment has been a vehicle, and to the social conditions—like homelessness—that the reorganization has generated, such projects are about urban spatial politics—the social relations of subordination that shape the organization of space in advanced capitalist society. But to counter the instrumental use of art by real estate, corporations, and city government in the redevelopment process, they sought to transform the art world’s own spatial relations as well. Since art’s supposed universality and autonomy—actually a constructed relation of exteriority to other spaces—has permitted “the aesthetic” to legitimate all kinds of oppressive economic and political systems, these projects attempted to “go public” by eroding the aura of isolation erected around art institutions. Sponsored by art organizations housed in redeveloped urban neighborhoods, they encouraged audiences to recognize that the social problems of the city, often considered extraneous to art, actually constitute some of the conditions of art’s current existence. By organizing public meetings and utilizing billboards or newspaper inserts, they transgressed the borders of the art gallery, linking it to other sites and reaching out to new audiences in the hope of constituting a public that would critically debate the housing question.

In part, then, the art world has conjured the concept of “the public” to contest the appropriation of that category by forces legitimating new public spaces and a new public art that have less to do with the democratization of the city than with the imposition of new forms of subordination. Some artists and critics have turned their attention to the literature of urban studies and especially to materialist urban theories that analyze the production of space as a conflictual process of domination and resistance to domination under capitalism rather than as a natural or technological process expressing the needs of a unified society. Urban theory contributed to the development of a genuinely site-specific public art that draws attention to and encourages debate about the political struggles structuring public art’s urban sites. Work such as Krzysztof Wod-
iczko’s real-estate and homeless projections in New York and Boston disrupt the apparent stability of newly gentrified and redeveloped public monuments or city spaces. Interest in “the public” and “the urban” grew rapidly and in a complementary relationship on the left wing of the art world in the 1980s as dual antidotes to the role played by aestheticist concepts of art and by naturalizing concepts of urban growth in affirming the redevelopment process. Against the authoritarian character of new physical public spaces—spaces of exclusion—and against the authoritarianism inherent in the concept of the public as a homogeneous group—a coherence achieved by expelling conflicts—artists and critics, allied with housing activists, sought a more democratic idea of public space.

There is no inherent contradiction between the challenge that this work raises to authoritarian spatial arrangements and the goals of artists engaged with questions of visual representation. On the contrary, the two projects are likely to overlap and, sharing the objective of politicizing spatial relations, are difficult to separate in the first place. Still, as I suggested earlier, critics often classify them as discrete and incompatible ventures. True, work on the politics of vision emphasizes less recognizable concepts of publicness and of spatial politics. Yet, it was precisely these concepts that Hal Foster invoked—or so it seems in retrospect—when he called his Dia discussion about the cultural public sphere, “The Birth and Death of the Viewer: On the Public Function of Art.” What “definition of public” does this title signal? For nearly two decades, postmodern art practices have challenged essentialist notions of art’s universality, first insisting that it is in the act of viewing, not in the possession of an autonomous aesthetic property, that the meaning of images arises and, second, defining viewers as “socially constructed” subjects. Postmodern explorations of the image fixed the identity of images and viewers in a “public space,” outside themselves, in a set of relations with other elements. Practices using contemporary feminist ideas about subjectivity removed the relational system itself from essentialism—from determination by a stable, central element—by locating meaning not in a social realm exterior to visual images or outside a complex of representations altogether but in the subject’s relationships with images. Looking, these practices demonstrated, is a process of “public vision.” Artists engaged in critiques of visual representation, such varied artists as Mary Kelly, Cindy Sherman, Silvia Kolbowski, Connie Hatch, and Barbara Kruger, not only investigated how images signify meanings in frameworks of use and social practice. They also analyzed the role that vision plays in the mechanisms of identification through which subjects represent themselves as universal, coherent, total beings.

Used in connection with such work, the term public space does not designate an empirically identifiable terrain or even a space produced by social relations. Nor does public space refer only to concrete institutional sites where
meanings are manufactured and circulated. It designates instead the relations structuring vision and discourse themselves. Art dealing with issues of representation engages in spatial politics, then, when it questions the strategies of localization, or interiorization, typical of authoritarian discourses. To localize meaning and identity—to assert that they are confined in discrete sites and determinate origins—is to deny the worldly relations that, in the absence of transcendental sources of truth, both constitute meanings and, crucially, put them at risk. Of course, feminist critiques also rejected the notion that femininity is an intrinsic property of female persons and explored it instead as a position in social relations of difference, a position whose subordination allowed idealized images of masculinity. And work that utilized feminist ideas about images questioned, along with feminist practices in other disciplines and movements, the spatial constructs of radical social theories that make gender or sexuality the auxiliary of relations assumed to be fundamentally political. Moreover, by investigating the image as itself a relation, they challenged the subordination of the politics of representation to another politics situated outside—a model that leaves the image per se politically neutral.

At this point, artists’ interrogation of the politics of localization merges with feminism’s long-standing inquiry into the “location of politics.” The assertion of feminism as a requisite mode of political critique, of sexual difference and gender as relations that are irreducible to some more basic social relation, and of vision as an independent object of political analysis—all different from other critiques, relations, and objects—casts doubt on the existence of an a priori privileged place from which to transform society. The public space this work investigates—the relational space where identities, including the identity of politics, are constituted and modified—is, in this sense, a democratic one, free of absolutist privilege.

Both the projects I have outlined, work dealing with urban spatial politics and work on the space of representation, entail a recognition that the category of “the public” and its attendant categories—public sphere, public function, public art, public intellectual, public space—are discursive objects rather than transparent designations of groups, realms, activities, places, or entities. But as a discursive formation, “the public” is not simply a category “susceptible,” as Craig Owens warned, “to appropriation by diverse—even opposed—ideological interests.” Its constitution as a category, presupposing a distinction from “the private,” is a political relation in which relationships are drawn, exclusions enacted and, in the process, subjects positioned. The important question with which Owens left us—“Who is to define, manipulate, and profit from ‘the public’ today?”—calls then for another question: Who is the subject of public space?

Yet critics often ignore this question despite a general eagerness to appropriate the term public from mainstream and neoconservative domination. To be
sure, “the public” now appears regularly in critical art discourse where, instead of the site of universal interests and truths that must be protected from politics, public space and public art stand for politicization itself. But what kind of politics? Increasingly, we hear that art’s publicness is ensured by the willingness, as one advocate puts it, of “progressive artists” to respond to the necessity of supporting the goals and identities of community movements and of those forms of social struggle that are elsewhere grouped under the heading of “new social movements”—feminist, gay, AIDS activist, ecological, etc.19 Promoting “civic consciousness” through “political education,” these activities represent the “recovery of the public function of art.”20 Another cultural scholar, writing in a recent issue of Social Text devoted to the public sphere, concurs: by “serving the needs of particular communities and simultaneously publicizing their practice for wider access,” artists are “recovering the public function of art.”21

This critic was assessing art’s public function in light of current neoconservative and New Right efforts to eliminate public arts funding in the United States. How, he asked, has the art world contested conservative efforts to privatize the public sphere? Rejecting, as complicit with the depoliticization inherent in notions of aesthetic autonomy and universal public values, those liberal responses that defend the abstract freedom of the artist, he concluded that the most viable contestations come from artists aligned with new social movements, artists, who, in his words, “dispense with the frame” by working outside conventional art institutions. In so doing, they have “recovered the public function of art.” Restricting the definition of institutions to, on the one hand, “the market (galleries and auction houses tacitly supported by museum practice)” and, on the other hand, nonprofit foundations governed by expert panels he, like many art critics, believes that the basis of the “recovery” of art’s public function lies in opposing these “systems of exclusion” by transforming “the material conditions of the institution: means of production, distribution, reception, publicity, and so on.” Without this transformation, no public function is possible.

There can, I agree, be little doubt that art involved in new social movements, “aesthetic practices by which group identity and ethos are formed,” are crucial public practices.22 Certainly they should be named as such to dispute conservative aesthetic mandates for the privatization of the public realm. But does the imperative of taking a stand against Jesse Helms or Hilton Kramer require the positioning of particular art practices as the privileged occupant of public space? Or do recategorizations of public art that are reluctant to dispense with the frame of rigid public/private dichotomies run the risk of generating alternative privatizations, though not necessarily in the most material sense? What, for example, in the above-mentioned accounts of the recovery of art’s threatened public dimension is in danger of disappearing from the public
realm? What has happened to that other set of art practices which, as I suggested earlier, also formed a principal impetus for the redefinition of art as public: postmodern, and, especially, feminist work on images, subjectivity, and vision as themselves, precisely, public? Such work, says one critic, has no practical function because it is located in a space that is “outside social functioning.” “Regrettably,” he writes, “the art world is separated from social functioning by a complex mechanism that defines ‘disciplines’ in the arts and humanities” and which, “fragmenting knowledge, while distancing it from practical circumstances . . . drains the aesthetic of any practical dimension.”

Work on the “politics of representation,” if it is situated in an art institution and directed toward an art audience, he continues, “promotes an illusion of cultural practice that is socially disinterested and nonpolitical.”

Again, the second critic agrees: “The ‘politics of representation’ engaged in by this type of art . . . [t]his play on the constructedness of images . . . does not necessarily lead to changing the conditions that produced them in the first place.”

Within this perspective, the gallery and museum appear as the antitheses of public space. They are private for two reasons. In the first critic’s view, the aestheti-cist ideologies underlying the prestige of art institutions separate art from society understood as a totality. Art institutions then are not simply neutralizing systems but “fragmenting” forces, and fragmentation, assessed negatively, is presupposed to constitute a withdrawal from an all-embracing space of social practice and public life. Secondly, aestheticism only expresses at the cultural level a foundation—“the conditions that produce images in the first place”—of social meaning. When critics assume an essence of art’s publicness in the transformation of basic material conditions or in alliances with social movements that are held to participate in a total social practice, their support for artists they believe are recovering art’s public function occurs at the expense of other practices whose different political concerns they disparage as private. The particular casualty of the either/or construction of the public I cited above, the artist held up as a foil against which publicness can be measured, is the photographer, Cindy Sherman, whose “deconstruction of socially constructed representations of women in patriarchal society,” the author contends, may “challenge the authority of representation” but are easily accommodated within the institution.

In the name of the public, such a position resurrects as an unquestioned assumption the very polarization—between the formal operations of images and a politics exerted from the outside—that feminist critiques of representation, establishing a constitutive link between images and sexuality, questioned from the start. To disagree with this position is not to deny that images signify meanings within institutional structures. However, work on the sexual politics of images problematizes (as practices aligned with new social movements also
do) the boundaries that sequester the institution from its outside. Aesthetics—the doctrine, crucial to the illusion of the art institution’s neutrality, that aesthetic vision is the disinterested perception of unified form—is challenged by the implication of “pure form” in the sexual pleasures of looking, and these pleasures, as Jacqueline Rose holds, are in turn part of an aesthetically extraneous political space.26 To accept Rose’s formulation that work on the sexual politics of images represents a challenge to established institutions, one has to accept, of course, that vision and sexual difference are public matters. Yet, within the parameters of a notion of the public defined by a single, controlling element or committed to the “restoration” of a unified social practice, work on the politics of images is not only expelled from the public sphere but implicated in its loss. Work like Sherman’s, in this view, nourishes the institutional frame, since its content—images and sexual difference—remain, at heart, a nonpublic matter.

Is it really possible to sever the art world and the aesthetic realm from “social functioning” and “the public”? What concept of the public enables this separation? And what does it mean to say that a “fragmentation” of spaces destroys the public sphere? Some critics support their dislike of “fragmentation” by comparing their own objections to important critiques—such as Edward Said’s “Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies, and Community”27—of the role that academic expertise and disciplinary specialization play in depoliticizing knowledge. But they mistakenly conclude from these critiques that politicized knowledge must, by contrast, “restore” the ultimate coherence of political life. Transferred into public art debates as the sine qua non of art’s publicness, doesn’t this conclusion endow the public sphere with an identity as an original unity, turning ‘the public’ into what Bruce Robbins calls a “mythic plenitude from which the disciplines must then ceaselessly and vainly lament their impoverished exile”?28 And doesn’t this account of the public as a lost realm of wholeness—a concept that gives rise to beliefs in a singular public function for art—entail its own politics of representation, positioning work with specific and different functions as partial, therefore fragmenting forces?

A similar logic informs the idea that the politics of images can be reduced to “conditions that produced them in the first place,” conditions whose alteration constitutes the foundation of public activity. For doesn’t this localization of meaning in basic objective structures smuggle back into art discourse, but now in the name of the very public space that was introduced to counter authoritarian notions of the public, the assertion of a unique space of politics that feminist theories of representation initially rejected? In this way, encouragement of art’s public functions becomes a medium for representing as a polarity the similarity I first observed between two kinds of art practices, admittedly different but both committed to developing a critical public space. Harmony cannot be restored, however, by simply reuniting them, since in the
process of elaborating a definition of the public, critics who polarize the two
have diverged from the premise on which the feminist politics of representation
conceived what I called a democratic public space—the absence of external
grounds of meaning.

The opposition drawn in recent art criticism between, on the one hand, the
politics of representation and, on the other hand, the alliance of art with spe-
cific social movements depends, we have seen, on a prior distinction: the strict
demarcation of the public sphere—identified as political, singular, whole—
from the private—seen as fragmented and nonpolitical. It is hardly surprising
that such a distinction surfaces by consigning some feminist theories to the
private realm; this merely confirms feminism’s long-standing suspicion of the
spatial relations that structure the public/private divide and of the subjects
who, identifying with the public as a unity, police it. In the name of an essen-
tial location of politics, women, of course, but feminism, too, have repeatedly
been forced into privacy. The question of the location of politics, encapsulated
in the feminist slogan “the personal is political,” is reproduced again, as Bruce
Robbins observes, in a “tension within the concept of ‘the public’ between a
tight, authoritative singleness (the public as object of a quest for a universal
collective subject or a privileged arena of struggle) and a relaxed, comfortable
pluralism (public—ness as a quantity spread liberally through many irreducibly
different collectivities).”

That the question of the location of politics resides today at the heart of
critical concepts of the public sphere should, however, remind us that the ques-
tion of who is to define the public cannot be directed solely at conservative or
mainstream discourse. Nor are the attendant questions of manipulation and
profit irrelevant when assessing critical ideas of publicness. As Nancy Fraser
notes, “In contemporary political discourse, the ‘private’ and the ‘public’ are
powerful terms that are frequently deployed to delegitimate some interests,
views, and topics and to valorize others . . . to restrict the universe of legiti-
mate public contestation.” Indeed, as concepts of “the public” and, as we
shall see, “the urban,” have become criteria by which to measure aesthetic pol-
itics, certain kinds of feminist practices have been positioned as nonpublic. Or
rather, through the consignment of feminist work on subjectivity to privacy,
other practices emerge as public ones. Critical voices in the art world, then,
can no more afford to formulate ideas about public art by uncovering the rela-
tions of domination disavowed by liberal or conservative notions than the left
in general can confine discussions of democracy to exposing the mystifications
of bourgeois democracy while ignoring the undemocratic character of some of
its own theories. To concentrate on distinguishing affirmative concepts of “art
in public places” from critical ones of “the cultural public sphere” and exhaust
the apprehension of other contests over “the public,” is to run the risk of rein-
stating the public as a realm of purity that can be rescued from distortions.
And if the unity of the public sphere is believed to be the product of a foundation of the social which governs all political relations (for which appeals to “the material conditions of art’s existence” often stand in), then practices that address other, incommensurable relations or reflect on their own relations will emerge, and be rejected, under the signs of fragmentation and privacy.

Still, it is particularly ironic when critics divide the politics of aligning art with new social movements from the politics of vision. This division fails to consider that both—new social movements and postmodern theories of representation—have challenged foundationalist social theories, questioning, among other things, the premise that class politics ensures the unity of the emancipatory struggles. Isn’t it inconsistent to reject one practice for the very quality that also defines the other, approved practice? To assert the existence of a foundation determining the meaning of images which must be changed before art can be public while celebrating new social movements that assume an independence of such a foundation? These movements represent new forms of political identity distinguished by their difference from traditional political movements, by their distance from overall solutions, and their demands for new, specific rights. Antagonistic to the universalisms of formal democracy, they refuse submission to regulatory powers in the form of political parties abrogating to themselves the authority to exclude specificity and difference under the banner of an essential political interest. To be sure, this refusal invites accusations that new social movements are divisive forces menacing the harmony—or potential harmony—of political struggle. But if the idea of a preconstituted harmony is understood as the fiction of subjects who try to escape partiality by identifying with an image of the social plenitude, then “fragmentation” can be restorative. It allows the perception of conflicts, heterogeneity, and indeterminacy in the social, a precondition of the search for new kinds of common ground.

When critics who support new social movements position feminist work on representation as nonpublic because it is “fragmented,” “isolated from social practice,” or peripheral to the basic “conditions” producing images, they undermine the very politics of difference which, in other ways, they vigorously defend. They thus end up in partial alignment with the more influential rejections of the politics of difference contained in the theories of postmodernism proposed by such scholars as Fredric Jameson or, more recently, the urban geographer, David Harvey.31 Jameson and Harvey, sharing the widespread commitment to public space, try to foster the appropriation of space from capitalist domination. Both authors deplore “fragmentation” in the name of an urban spatial politics, the discourse introduced into the art world in tandem with discussions of “the public” to help forge more democratic concepts of public art. Unlike many art critics, however, Jameson and Harvey appreciate the similarity between new social movements and postmodern explorations of
images. Each development, they argue, springs from a confusion of our perceptual apparatus and, in turn, perpetuates confusion. The trouble originates, however, in the global spatio-economic restructuring that constitutes the third stage of capitalism. A new international spatial network, made possible by technological advances, facilitates capital accumulation and, at the same time, precipitates a crisis of representation, overwhelming our ability to perceive capitalism’s exploitative operations and to represent the totality. Unable to discern the underlying coherence of social reality, the subject is blinded to its own political place—equated with class consciousness—and so cannot initiate the action necessary to transform society.

As Harvey concludes, following Jameson, “Postmodernism is nothing more than the cultural logic of late capitalism,” a component, in other words, of capital’s fragmenting effects. Politically, fragmentation appears as a proliferation of new political identities with no adherence to a norm; aesthetically, fragmentation appears as a focus on images rather than on a reality or history believed to underlie them. (For Harvey, too, Cindy Sherman’s photographs exemplify postmodernism’s “complicity.”) Thus, the questions that postmodern practices have raised about universalizing thought and foundational totalities as, themselves, forms of subordination become, in Harvey’s and Jameson’s analyses, complicit with capitalism. Whereas some postmodern work on images suggests that it is the very condition of representation to be in crisis since no underlying presence guarantees truth, Jameson believes that a truly radical art practice should help end the crisis by producing coherent images—“cognitive maps”—of the social whole. The space of aesthetic politics is the revelation of the real space of politics.

What these explanations disavow is the space from which they speak. Is it a public space? Claiming to observe the essence of a socio-spatial reality, the subjects of such accounts are elevated to a position outside, not in, the world. Accordingly, others are demoted to secondary rank or worse. Within the terrain of Harvey’s urban discourse, for instance, where political reality can be reduced to uneven spatio-economic arrangements, and the homeless (products of these arrangements) become the privileged figures of political—public—space, efforts to talk about urban space differently are tantamount to escapism, quietism, complicity. Feminists who analyze the image of the city, for instance, not as an object tested against objective reality but as a relation with a viewing subject (an approach which, in my view, is essential to understanding and changing current representations of and attitudes toward homeless people) are accused of callousness toward poor city residents and set up as enemies of the homeless. Farfetched as such a conclusion may sound, its logic is hardly unfamiliar in the history of radical social thought. When critics adopt it, however, they invoke the homeless less to promote social justice than to prove the superior penetration of their own social vision.
Fortunately, we have concepts of public space that thwart such ambitions. Claude Lefort, for one, associates public space with the historical adventure that Tocqueville called “the democratic revolution.” For Lefort, the destruction of monarchical power instituted a radically new form of society in which power is no longer believed to derive from a transcendent source. A vacuum opens up at the spot where the essential unity of society—emanating from God—was once embodied in the figure of the king. Power is now believed to reside in “the people”—inside the social itself. Because the people no longer possess an absolute definition, however, power “is linked” in the democratic moment “to the image of an empty place.”33 “Power becomes and remains democratic when it proves to belong to no one.”34 And with the disappearance of an objective guarantor of power, guarantees of social unity disappear as well. It is then from a negativity that the public space comes into being, the space where human beings speak to each other, construct society, and form political identities through the declaration of rights. What is recognized in the public space is the legitimacy of debate, a debate in which no one can seek the support of an external judge.

Totalitarianism, the ruin of democracy, attempts to fill the void created by the democratic revolution, banish the indeterminacy of the social, and restore a substance to social coherence. It endows “the people” with a basic identity, an essential interest or “oneness,” with which the totalitarian state identifies itself, thereby closing down the public space.35 For the public space is the limit of such tutelary power. It is the space where people declare rights and which, paradoxically, is constituted through the declaration. A fixed point of access to politics, a unique space of the political, an essence of social reality: these are obstacles to the spread of public space which is always in gestation.

The extension of public space requires, instead, a proliferation of social movements organized around irreducibly different political identities, a heterogeneity ungovernable by a predetermined norm. Those who advocate the alliance of art with new social movements are perfectly right to call such collaborations a public practice. But when they say that it is public because it restores a fundamental unity or addresses an absolute source of political meaning, claims that can be advanced only by failing to recognize others within public space, they close the borders of the very public realm whose openness they want to defend. This closure depends on a rigid distinction between the public and the private with, in one sense, the private understood as a place of differences and the public as a privileged, unitary sphere. But it also assumes the existence of another privileged place outside the public debate from which the sovereign subject observes the element unifying the public sphere. The rigor of this public/private distinction is what work on subjectivity in visual representation threatens by insisting that identity and meaning are formed in a public space and thereby questioning the possibility of external viewpoints.
Ernesto Laclau has suggested that the main task of postmodern culture in democratic struggles is “to transform the forms of identification and construction of subjectivity that exist in our civilization.” When work on the politics of images directs attention to processes of viewing and to the fantasy structures through which subjects, in relations with images, identify with wholeness and flee from difference, shouldn’t we welcome such work as extensions of public space? Especially if we want to prevent the conversion of the public sphere into someone’s private sphere.

Notes


5. This phrase comes from Nancy Fraser. See “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” Social Text 25/26 (1990), 56–80.

6. In making this distinction, Hall draws on the work of Ernesto Laclau who, in his Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory (London and New York: Verso, 1977), distinguishes genuine mobilizations of popular demands and discontents from populist mobilizations which at a certain point are recuperated into statist-led political leadership. (See Stuart Hall, “Authoritarian Populism: A Reply to Jessop et al.,” in Hard Road to Renewal, 150–60.) Hall succinctly summarizes the difference between the two at the end of his essay, “Popular-Democratic vs. Authoritarian Populism” (see note 3). Referring to the radical right, he concludes: “What gives it this character are its unceasing efforts to construct the movement towards a more authoritarian regime from a massive populist base. It is ‘populist’ because it cannot be ‘popular-democratic’” (146, my emphasis).


10. Deutsche, “Uneven Development.”


15. Hal Foster, “Preface,” in Foster, ed., *Discussions in Contemporary Culture*.


20. Ibid.


22. Ibid., 136.


24. Ibid.


30. Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere.”


