

THE POWER OF AGENCY

Urban Communication and the Rhetoric of Public Art

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An area is not a slum simply because the people living there are poor and black. A community becomes a slum when the space is represented for everyone (including those who live there) by those who don't live there.

—Marback (1998, p. 82)

What is *urban space*? How is it connected to urban life and communication? Sociologists, urban planners, cultural theorists, and rhetorical critics are among those who have sought to address these questions. The answers have ranged from definitions based in social groups and networks, to a specific collection of economic and public policies and practices, to, as Marback's quote demonstrates, a rhetorical practice. Gombrich (1982), the art historian, characterized city life as visual-intensive: People are bombarded with visual

objects that act as social codes and evoke a sense of cultural value. As we consider the extent to which urban spaces contain competing desires, uses, definitions, images, and narratives, there is a need to move the conversation from description and definition to analysis: to an examination of the processes by which urban spaces are created and enacted through discourses, materialities, and experiences, processes central to human communication.

One important way to accomplish this is through an examination of public art. Because of its materiality, public art both inhabits and creates a place and a space where tensions are projected, illuminated, and articulated. Multiple meanings exist and are evoked on both an emotional and intellectual level, yet the materiality of the work and the space suggest a consensus that is rarely, if ever, attained. Indeed, the very processes by which public art works come to be are themselves indicative of the struggles, the hopes, the promises, and the practices that make up urban life. Public art in urban spaces holds out the promise of public, democratic deliberation, even as it reminds us repeatedly of the realities of imposed control by elites, whether corporate, governmental, or cultural. There are many examples of public art projects located in urban spaces that enact the desire of elites to control what is valued and who is worthy of power and recognition. For instance, elites may argue that a particular aesthetic use of a space is desirable and good and that the public eventually will come to appreciate it (e.g., the *Monument to Joe Louis* in Detroit, Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* in New York). But, by imposing a particular interpretation of a site, public art also calls attention to those power structures and power struggles that may otherwise remain hidden or unspoken. Indeed, as Senie and Webster (1992) indicated:

Public art with its built-in social focus would seem to be an ideal genre for a democracy. Yet, since its inception, issues surrounding its appropriate form and placement, as well as its funding, have made public art an object of controversy more often than consensus or celebration. Originally viewed by many in the new nation as a luxury incompatible with republican values, public art (indeed art in general) was (and continues to be) regarded with distrust. (p. xi)

This leads to our second thesis, namely, that public art serves several important rhetorical functions. This argument is based on the following observations: First, that by its focus on values (an epideictic function), public art highlights, evokes, and intensifies emotional responses. But, unlike other contemporary forms of discourse that seek to intensify emotional responses as a means for ensuring consumption (e.g., advertising), public art evokes a very different type of embodied emotional response. Whereas advertising uses emotional appeals quite often to override rational and/or argumentative capacity—it speaks to us at the level of our appetites or

hungers—public art inspires a sense-making impulse. Public art is difficult to ignore; instead it becomes a material exigence inviting response and reflection every time it is encountered by a viewer. It directs attention (in the Burkean sense) such that individuals are led to notice the material context in a way that previously may not have been significant. Public art does this at least partly because it is less ephemeral than many other rhetorical artifacts. It cannot be consumed like a product—it continues to stay there in our path, in our city, in our day-to-day seeing of it long after the last candy bar, burger, pizza slice, Bud Light are gone.

Second, public art invites viewers to make a judgment. This, too, is an essentially rhetorical function requiring a person to both think through their emotional, visceral responses, and to make sense of them in light of standards—it moves people in to the role of critic, a role that requires quite a different set of understandings than the mere act of consumption. This gets back to the issue that public art holds open the promise that the public has some (opportunity) for control in urban space, spaces that tend to be largely corporatized and/or institutionalized.

Third, the values of public art are not universal but are local, the product of an epoch—they are, in other words, historically contingent (Beardsley, 1981). As a result, public art links history and memory together in a way that says something about a community at a particular moment in history. Rhetoric deals with the contingent and the transcendent by focusing our attention on context and its complexities, complexities that include deep-seated and subtle issues of race, control, power, and privilege; in other words, who has agency to determine what appears in public spaces.

By bringing these three rhetorical functions of public art together, the emotive function, the invitation to express opinion and make a judgment, and the ability to concretize and offer a reflection on public memory and history (agency), public art in urban spaces contributes to discourses of public identity, providing a space of attention, a space to pause and reflect, a space of public engagement. Identity formation itself is very much a rhetorical process that is, again, historically contingent, dependent on meaning-making and reflections on the self within the context of a localized social, political and physical or material environment. This is why, as suggested earlier, public art often becomes a source of controversy, encouraging individuals to respond both emotionally as well as rationally, to articulate a position and further, to identify themselves as a member of the public being addressed by the art. As art critic Amy Goldin (1974) explained, "public art addresses its audience as participants in a public world. Sympathetic attention is not enough. We are encouraged to take sides" (p. 32). And as Arthur C. Danto (1985) pointed out, public art draws in anyone willing to take part in the discussion. Controversies over public art have provided opportunities for individuals to articulate their own positions in relation to urban, public

spaces, and the meaning these spaces have for individuals and communities. As Harriet Senie (1992) argued, "many controversies that appear to be about public art are actually about the use and meaning of the site" (p. 9).

Through examination of three brief case studies of contemporary public art in urban spaces, we demonstrate how a rhetorically informed perspective contributes to our understanding of the complexities of contested urban spaces including who controls the articulation of the meaning of a site and who controls the way public memory is represented. The first two cases focus on public art controversy, particularly the visual manifestation of elite control and the response that it elicits. The two cases are the controversy over *Tilted Arc* in Manhattan and the *Monument to Joe Louis* in Detroit. The third focuses on public art as vernacular expression, which articulates the resistance to the imposition of meaning, in the form of community murals.

RICHARD SERRA'S TILTED ARC

Tilted Arc, commissioned for Federal Plaza in lower Manhattan in 1979 and installed in 1981, made evident efforts to control the space in lower Manhattan in front of the federal Court House. Cultural elites, through the General Services Administration's (GSA) "Art-in-Architecture" program claimed the space as an opportunity for an aesthetic expression by a sculptor, Richard Serra, who had received acclaim by the established art world in which the avant-garde in general, and minimalism in particular, were institutionalized. Serra had already exhibited sculptures in elite museums and numerous public installations around the world. For this commission, he created a long, arcing steel wall that stretched across and occupied the center of Federal Plaza, towering above the heads of passersbys. It was large, imposing, and aggressive, forcing visitors and workers to walk around its rusting steel face. It was a wall in a crowded urban area, not far from Wall Street and the Twin Towers.

Tilted Arc functioned as a wall both physically and symbolically, and an especially urban wall, because it attracted graffiti. Many nonelites who worked or lived within the context of the Federal Plaza saw the sculpture as an imposition, functioning as a means to literally and figuratively divide the community. To them, the sculpture contained and controlled movement and limited access to a space that had previously been communally accessible and open to diverse uses and meanings in an urban area where such open space is highly limited. References to the sculpture such as the "Berlin Wall of Foley Square" reflected this perception of the wall as a function of elite control and oppression. Others also spoke of the sculpture as creating a "no-man's land" and constituting a "visual assault." (GSA Transcript, 1985).

In the hearing on whether to consider the sculpture's removal, meaning-making became paramount, along with delineation of identity in terms of what claim an individual or a community of individuals had on the space in the plaza. For example, prior to the creation of *Tilted Arc*, the health department had used the plaza as a site of health fairs and for public dissemination of health information. According to the head of the health department, the presence of the sculpture disrupted the coordination and success of these fairs, wresting opportunities for diverse and publicly directed uses of the space. Those in positions of political power—the political elite—who conducted the hearing, and who were appointees of a conservative administration, also challenged the authority of the cultural elites to control and define the plaza space. They perceived the sculpture to be an affront and a threat to their authority, magnifying their fears of who might be lurking in public "behind the wall." Furthermore, they equated the wall with symbols of terrorist attacks. The sculpture referenced terrorist barricades on the one hand, as well as a potential blast wall for directing the destructive force of a bomb towards their building.

Ultimately, *Tilted Arc* was removed, and this reflected, we argue, more the ascendance of a political elite over a cultural elite than the resistance of a group of nonelites connected to the site through their quotidian activities. However, the controversy over *Tilted Arc* and the hearing that ensued did provide an opportunity for articulation and definition—perhaps most significantly, for articulating and visually graphing the convergence of power struggles within the public realm, within a complex, socially and politically significant urban space.

MONUMENT TO JOE LOUIS, AKA, "THE FIST"

In the city of Detroit, located at the terminus of Woodward Avenue as it intersects with Jefferson Avenue, resides a sculpture of a Black forearm and fist, hung by cables from a triangular frame. It is situated directly across from a classical, allegorical statue known as the *Spirit of Detroit*, thrusting toward the futuristic fountain and pylon of Hart Plaza. This sculpture, representative yet also abstract in its disembodied form, and referred to in the vernacular of the city simply as "The Fist," is more formally known as the *Monument to Joe Louis*. What is the meaning, the significance, the potential, and the reality, of a huge bronze fist in the middle of a downtown intersection, in the heart of a city radically reconfigured by the affects of racial strife? It is heroic in scale, yet anti-heroic; it honors, yet cautions; it evokes memory and provokes debate; it is both glorious and grim.

On one level, the *Monument to Joe Louis* is unique because it explicitly evokes the memory of an African-American man who became a hero to both Black and White Americans during the 1930s when he seemed to embody the spirit, strength, and determination of America in his historic fight with the German boxer, Max Schmelling ("the Nazi"). It is also unique in that there are few public representations of African Americans in prominent urban locations. Yet the sculpture itself represents trends in public art that favor prominent artists chosen and approved by art world elites as opposed to locally rooted artists, and that deny opportunities for participation in the selection and design stages by representatives of the larger public. Furthermore, under the guise of "realism," the sculpture as a realistic but disembodied fist, is more representative of the abstract art that tends to be the mainstay of public arts commissions. Abstract art by its nature invites various and often contradictory readings. Thus, the disembodied forearm and fist may reference not only a fighter's punch, but intentionally or not, other images of forearms and fists, whether that be the Black power fist of the 1960s or, more recently, the strange and disturbing images of Saddam Hussein's "Hands of Victory": forearms holding swords at the entrance to his parade ground in Baghdad.

On the one hand then, the sculpture needs to be understood in a broader context of the history of commemorative public art commissions and controversies and the tenuous relationship between the public, commissioning agencies or patrons (in this case a corporate patron), the artists, and the public. *Monument to Joe Louis* is connected to this larger history involving the struggle over both defining and representing local and national histories and significant figures in that history and the struggles regarding the control of public space, particularly in an era when public space that is not controlled by private corporate interests is increasingly limited. *Monument to Joe Louis*, commissioned by *Sports Illustrated*, was created during the late 1980s when corporations became heavily involved in the arts and in financing public art commissions as a form of public relations as well as investment. As a consequence, corporate sponsorship influenced the shape and development of art in the public sphere, and in certain ways reflected efforts to control and influence the development of public culture. Corporations looked to art experts for advice, which as Erika Doss (1995) pointed out, makes the process more bureaucratic and less likely to incorporate or account for the interests and concerns of the local public who are on the receiving end of the commission. In many ways, this was reflected in the Joe Louis commission, because the selection of the artist and of the sculpture's location was controlled by art experts from the Detroit Institute of the Arts and then-mayor Coleman Young.

"The Fist" itself, although anatomically precise, is disembodied, abstracted, and decontextualized. Its aesthetic is modernist: form for its own

sake. This type of aesthetic came to dominate the "public" art scene in Detroit, as it did in many cities during the 1970s. In the aftermath of the race riots of 1967, civic and corporate leaders attempted to rejuvenate the city of Detroit by instituting a reinvigorated public art program (Nawrocki & Holleman, 1980). As Senie and Webster (1992) pointed out, such an initiative was somewhat common during this time period: "Public art became a part of urban renewal programs, as it had been in centuries past, functioning as an emblem of culture and a manifestation of economic wealth, a sign of the power of its patron" (p. xiv). Various works of art were thus sited in downtown Detroit public spaces. These works embodied a modernist aesthetic, and sometimes also invoked futuristic forms. They included geometric wall paintings and murals by various local and not-so-local artists, a twisted steel pylon and a steel fountain (shaped like a donut held up by two steel straws) designed by Isamu Noguchi, and various other abstract steel sculptures including ones by Alexander Calder and John Piet. The culmination of this "renaissance" was the building of the Renaissance Center on the riverfront in downtown Detroit. Resembling a fortress of steel and glass, the Renaissance Center has had a mixed history. Its gigantic scale and "cold" interior and exterior, plus its inaccessibility from the street, make it an impressive spectacle which people soon grow tired of. It continually struggles to attract and keep tenants and patrons.

Given that the concept of public art presupposes a fairly homogenous public and a language of art that speaks to all (Senie, 1992), the motive for, the aesthetic style, and the timing of Detroit's public art campaign during the 1970s are highly ironic. The campaign is a demonstration of the extent to which White elites continued to see the city as "theirs" despite the fact that they had played a significant role in creating and then ignoring the city's social and economic problems. Despite or perhaps even because of the riots, the White elites along with the emerging Black political elite, continued to neglect the views and values of their fellow citizens, whose perceptions of the art being foisted on the city were likely to be quite different from those of the elites, as Senie and Webster (1992) pointed out:

Seen from the vantage point of economic underclasses, public art is affirmation of their exclusion from power and privilege. Art in the public domain, a sign of the power of its patrons, frequently becomes the focus for discontents that often have nothing to do with art. Small wonder that public art and controversy seem to have been joined at birth. (p. 171)

Certainly, public art has had a mixed history in the United States and the modernist design aesthetic has caused controversy in other cities in regard to other installations as indicated by the analysis here of *Tiled Arc*. But the aes-

thetic of the *Monument to Joe Louis* has an additional disturbing side as well. The disembodied forearm and fist function as a metonym for Louis, and as such, the sculpture is both a grotesque caricature of the man and a glorification of his limb. Using one body part to symbolize the whole of a person objectifies the person, dismembers him or her, leaving the person ripe for consumption, domination, even violence. Feminist critiques of contemporary advertising center on this type of objectification of the female body for the male gaze and the troubling power relations thereby advocated. Given the level of control exercised by dominant elites over "The Fist," it can be read similarly: a piece of a (subhu)man, whose life can be reduced to one limb, to be held up for the gaze of the "public," a curiosity, a carnival sideshow, a burlesque oddity. The fact that "The Fist" is hung from a tripod by chains simply underscores such a reading. Perhaps it is not surprising then, that upon seeing the sculpture for the first time, Joe Louis's widow murmured, "It could be anybody's arm" (Carswell, 1987).

A counter movement culminated in the siting of a representational statue of Louis in the Cobo Hall Convention Center just 1 year later. An anonymous donor whose gift was "matched by Detroit citizens, Louis's family, public school students, teachers and staff" funded this second sculpture (Graves, 1992). The stated purpose of the commission was to site a sculpture that "the community could identify with," one that would serve as a corrective to "The Fist". The result was a 12-foot representational bronze statue of Louis in a boxing stance created by Ed Hamilton, an African-American sculptor who won the design competition (Graves, 1992). This second time around, the community chose a traditional, honorific style of commemoration associated with memorializing of the past and the cultural and political elites accepted the community's right to participation in the public representation of history.

As this discussion demonstrates, the *Monument to Joe Louis* is rhetorically powerful. Its aesthetic qualities and surrounding context (both physical and historical) provide the resources from which controversy, debate, and other forms of material rhetoric have emerged. Unlike other sites of memory that tend to emphasize progress and amnesia at the expense of contestation and debate, the arresting material and symbolic qualities of "The Fist" are hard to ignore. The memories evoked are much broader and more scattered than one might suppose from a sculpture titled for a specific person. Indeed, the hegemonic process by which the sculpture came into being, and the vernacular nature of the counter memorial in Cobo Hall, may be more apt, when taken together, to achieve a counter hegemony than any number of representational sculptures celebrating civil rights and/or the African-American experience. The *Monument to Joe Louis* materialized as an attempt to inscribe an elite group vision onto a city and its citizens but became, in addition, a resource for engagement.

COMMUNITY MURAL PROJECTS

As the counter memorial to Joe Louis in the case just illustrates, public art may also represent efforts by nonelites to provide what John Bodnar (1992) referred to as "vernacular" forms of public memory and identity, that essentially resist control by elites, whether they be political, corporate, or cultural elites. In this third case, individual communities within the broader cityscape use visual means to resist control and insert their own images and perceptions of themselves within public space, rhetorically framing and asserting their own agency within that space. These "vernacular" efforts are probably best represented by the community mural movement that began in the late 1960s in urban neighborhoods inhabited mainly by African American and Latino communities, and which gained inspiration from the Mexican Muralists such as Diego Rivera and built on the legacy of the Work Progress Administration murals of the 1930s and 1940s in America. The community mural movement, which is also called "people's art" or "street art," seeks to reclaim the meanings of urban space for the people living within them, and not leaving such meaning-making to outside elites who often defined such spaces as "ghettos," spaces sited for urban renewal.

One of the first examples of the "community-based mural movement" or "people's art," was the creation of the Wall of Respect on the south side of Chicago in 1967. The local city government, without consulting local residents, had designated a particular neighborhood to be razed as part of an urban renewal initiative. By reclaiming community space for the community, the Wall of Respect delayed those plans (see Cockcroft, Weber, & Cockcroft, 1977, p. 1). The project combined poetry, mural painting, and easel painting (boards installed on the wall) and was originally created as part of a festival of arts for the primarily Black citizens who lived nearby. Later, the mural became a rallying point for the community, an effort to reclaim the space of the community through images of pride, history and communal struggle. The inscription on the mural stated, "This Wall was created to Honor our Black Heroes, and to Beautify our Community" (Cockcroft et al., 1977, p. 3). The mural incorporated the rhetorical judgment of citizens as they determined who to include on the wall. In fact, images on the wall continued to change and evolve until the wall itself was finally destroyed as a result of another round of urban renewal efforts on the south side of Chicago.

More recently, this use of community-based murals to reclaim space, particularly spaces that have been abandoned for economic and political reasons, in neighborhoods that have little political or economic clout, has helped to revive democratic and community impulses. Community murals, as suggested by the case of the Wall of Respect, help to call attention to par-

ticular types of urban exigencies such as the need for creating positive images and memories of a community or the need to recognize the plight of a particular neighborhood and to initiate and direct a response. Community murals initiate impulses in the community that include seeing individuals as part of the community and as agents of change. This effort is also evident in community murals on urban neighborhood centers such as Casa Aztlan in Chicago where images of historic revolutionary figures in Mexico as well as figures from 20th-century liberation movements in the United States including Cesar Chavez, adorn the brilliantly colored outer and interior walls (see LaWare, 1998). These images serve to create a space of identification and pride where families and young people from the community seek assistance for better integrating into the dominant culture without completely forgoing their cultural memory or their community affiliation. As Cockcroft et al. (1977) explained, "people's art" incorporates and makes visible the real experiences of the people it addresses; "their history and struggles, their dignity and hopes" (p. xxii). "People's art" therefore, makes these localized experiences real and visible to those not only within the community but to publics outside the community as well. Community-based mural art makes visible meanings inherent to the identity of the local community to those who might be inclined to project or impose their own vision on the community from the outside.

Murals can also call attention to the need for beauty and care and can help people to not only feel that they are deserving of such beauty and care, but that they can act to expand the beauty reflected in the mural into their own lives and neighborhoods. Philadelphia is a city where this is perhaps most visible. Community muralists working in progressively deteriorating neighborhoods have collaborated with the local residents to create beautiful images of hope and transformation. For example, graffiti artists whose work tends to reflect the deterioration of community and the control of neighborhoods by gangs and drug lords, have been transformed into muralists. One mural artist reported that members of the neighborhood asked her to paint waterfalls, because they wanted images of flowing water, "to show how things were going to be cleaned up and get better" (Halpern, 2002, p.1). Jane Golden, a community mural artist who has been working in north and west Philadelphia neighborhoods since 1984, emphasized the power of community murals to not only make art accessible to people, but to "create real neighborhood change" (Halpern, 2002, p. 2). Near murals, community people feel empowered to take charge of their neighborhoods, plant gardens, plan neighborhood gatherings, and even force out drug dealers. The murals communicate that the people who live there do care and cherish beauty and mourn the devastation engulfing not only the material context of their lives, but also the human context, particularly the young who find no anchors of hope in the built environment or in other local settings. Murals communi-

cate possibilities for hope and transformation from within the community, providing a space for recognizing agency, the ability to assert a collective will against hopelessness and neglect resulting from poverty and racism and to suggest alternative possibilities for the future.

CONCLUSION

As indicated by the cases cited here, examining public art in urban spaces provides a rhetorical means for coming to understand some of the complex dynamics that define urban communication, dynamics that reflect struggles for power and control over the creation, meaning, and use of public resources, including public spaces. The examples above show the way public art, both through controversy and through community involvement, essentially highlights and brings to attention, often as diverse exigencies, the particular forces beneath the surface that shape the contours of urban life. *Tilted Arc* and the hearing concerning its removal delineated the conflicting power bases of conservative political elites and established cultural elites, as well as efforts by the local community to insert their own meaning into public space. The controversy over *Tilted Arc* ultimately transformed the conduct of public arts commissions by compelling commissioning agencies to better incorporate the needs and interests of local publics more effectively and to reflect diverse uses of a site. *Monument to Joe Louis* also delineated conflicting efforts to define and control Detroit's urban spaces, bringing head to head corporate, cultural, and political elites and, ultimately, the community. As a monument to a prominent individual, "The Fist" also evoked other feelings and memories as a result of its aesthetic and visual properties, its racial connotations, and its location, all of which are indicative of its rhetorical character. Citizens were (and continue to be) emotionally engaged by it, taking on the role first of critic and then of agents who successfully demanded the right to participate in decisions about the public representation of history. Finally, the community murals discussed illuminate not only the devastating results of ongoing struggles between corporate, political, and even cultural elites in marking out territory in urban areas for attention and territory for neglect and abuse, but also efforts by local communities to redefine those spaces for themselves. All three examples show the way public art can create opportunities for identification, and ultimately agency, by making visible the citizens and the communities whose interests are incorporated into, reflected, and often challenged, by the material and discursive symbols used to frame and define urban spaces.

Examining the rhetorical functions of public art enables us to chart the processes by which urban spaces are created and enacted through discours-

es, materialities, and experiences, thereby providing resources for invention: shared commitments to beauty and community revitalization (the community murals project), the attractions of accessible, open spaces in the urban environment (*Tilted Arc*), and the community nature of public memory (*Monument to Joe Louis*). Such resources are necessary to developing theories and practices of urban communication that move us beyond the restrictions of current economic, political, and racially grounded modes of enactment.

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