

avoid the element of spectacle inherent in such processes. Concurrent with the realization of the interventions, we hope to introduce the most important urban projects planned for the eastern region: the implementation of a new express train system, projects for large, inactive railway areas and a vast, multifunctional tower. Could *Arte/Cidade*, a project originally conceived for artistic interventions in urban space, unfold into a field of discussion about urban renovation processes in which artistic and urban planning interventions would gain another scale or degree of significance? Is it capable of obtaining sufficient credibility that it can discuss governmental initiatives and those of large private corporations? In the current setting of the management of cities and culture, dominated by corporate and institutional operations with great economic and political power, is it possible to create a public space for the debate on urban development and artistic production alternatives? [www.artecidade.org.br](http://www.artecidade.org.br)

**The Landscape within the City:  
Displayed, Turned to Profit and Forgotten  
Rosa Olivares**

In the last few decades, an inordinate amount of importance has been given to installing works of art—or objects considered to be art—in public spaces. Indeed it has practically become a genre of contemporary art in and of itself, a practice adopted by more artists everyday: not only as sculpture—as has been the tradition until now—but as an extensive series of diverse, extraordinary staging art projects, of installations of objects whose very existence exemplifies better than any theory the evolution and development of sculpture today. But when we speak of public art, or art in public spaces, we are speaking of much more than simply art. Indeed, a series of elements comes together in public art projects that defines them above and beyond their value as art in purely economic

as well as political terms but also in terms of their fashionable, social or decorative aspects (to name but a few) which also change in every situation. This boom of public installations is taking place all over

The world, in all kinds of cities, but it is perhaps most visible as a phenomenon in small European cities. It is true that contemporary megalopolises hold a very particular attraction characteristic of our time, but in spite of the incredible size of their populations and their high levels of conflict, indeed most cities around the world are not megalopolises but rather small cities, though themselves varying somewhat in scale.

In big cities, issues concerning living conditions and the resulting need for a range of aesthetic strategies define a problem that seems far removed from the small and sometimes absurd issues that are apparently still at stake in smaller cities. Issues such as speculation, major landscape modification and the coexistence of very different ethnic, cultural and social groups do not necessarily have a bearing on the creation of public spaces in cities with smaller populations. However, indeed maybe because of their particularity and smaller size, the problematic existing in cities that number between 50 000 and 300 000 inhabitants can be analyzed as a case study: it is easier to identify and understand problems on a smaller scale, and once they have been isolated, the answers that are found can be transferred to other places or other spaces.

Concretely speaking, the municipality of Vitoria-Gasteiz in northern Spain's Basque Country is a small city which, though it is the political capital of the Autonomous Basque Region, does not have a large population (around 210 000 inhabitants) but one of the highest levels of quality of life in Spain—so much so that it has been called the "small Switzerland." Every neighborhood or area, old and new, has every imaginable social amenity, including parks, hospitals, sports facilities, public libraries and of course—1% of

the cost of any construction project allocated to art. In other words, sculptures, fountains or art structures are installed in every new park and neighborhood. The big problem is that this has been going on since the 1970s. In those years, funds were allocated to the buying of sculptures whose concept and materials were rooted in nineteenth-century aesthetics and their expression in the decoration of gardens, religious- and public-building facades and the design of squares and other public spaces in the city. Hence, for over thirty years, objects have been installed all over the city—a small one, we should recall—leading to the fact that not a single square, street, park or corner is bereft of an object that, whether made of stone, wood or iron or any other material, is supposed to be a work of art.

But tastes and fashions in art and aesthetics have changed considerably over these past thirty years and, more importantly, so have social customs and political conditions, while shifts have occurred in the power structure. During this period, there have been autocratic mayors from different parties who have kept absolute, unquestioned power over their terms in office, ruling municipal parties have changed from left to right and, most importantly, nationalist sentiment is on the rise: on the level of a small city, this has translated into a rather parochial outlook. In terms of the decisions that the city has made with regard to culture, we therefore encounter that the vast majority of the alleged art that has been commissioned, bought and installed in city streets is the work of young local artists who are practically unknown—or completely unknown—beyond the municipality's immediate surroundings. We are faced with a manipulated reality whereby the 100 or more pieces installed in these last thirty years have practically no value as heritage and little artistic merit. Less than a dozen of these works have resisted not only the passing of time but even the usually more benevolent passing of artistic judgment. Most of them are either donations or acqui-

sitions from young artists who did summer workshops in the city, or purchases by individuals associated in one way or another to certain public figures or parties. Works have been bought from artists who do not exhibit and are not represented by galleries—many of them do not even consider themselves artists but rather almost as hobbyists—and that would not even have been accepted as donations by any municipal museum collection.

Given this situation, the city administration currently in office has decided to undertake a technical study of the city's sculpture collection to see which pieces should be removed, restored or relocated. After a series of studies and meetings, a qualified representative of the art world is commissioned to catalogue and appraise each and every sculpture's artistic quality, market value and material conditions. The result of the initial inquiry was emphatic: the city must be cleaned up, its image brought up to date with works specially commissioned for specific sites: currently installed pieces must be cleaned and restored, and those that are either eyesores, in disrepair, or that given their size, particular materials, etc. are not properly installed must be removed. Though it has the municipal government's unanimous support, this technical decision has hit one small snag: public opinion.

Public opinion. The public is never consulted when anything is installed, but it seems as if it were entirely its responsibility when the time comes to remove something. No one seems to recall the manipulation to which this public opinion is constantly subjected: lack of education in terms of aesthetics, lack of information, a habitual ugliness in cities that increasingly outgrow their natural bounds, featuring bad architecture and lacking references to the art of our time... To install works of art on public thoroughfares, in public space, should be a result of public interest: giving art and beauty back to the people, making our cities more

human, more livable and involving them more in contemporary thinking and culture. However, the truth of the matter is that installing works—art—in public spaces has become a money-making scheme for some, a demonstration of power for others, an exercise in bad taste for most and, in social terms, a nuisance to a city's dwellers.

The usual process is to plan a great spectacle for the media, obtaining publicity for the politician who commissioned the piece and for the art group who made it; the following step is economic and, depending on the project's characteristics, funds are raised by either an art promoter or the companies building the piece and to a lesser extent the artist, though this differs greatly from one case to another; in general, however, the better the funding, the worse the art project. We could put forth a mathematical rule whereby the quality of the project decreases as the pageantry and money increases. Naturally, with any installation, the idea that the piece is definitive, i.e. will remain in place forever, carries a lot of weight on a technical as well as conceptual level—and I would even dare to say on a moral level—as if we could foresee the future from a given date, foresee an eternity for any given work subjected to the passing of time, weather and political and aesthetic changes. If nothing, absolutely nothing, is eternal, it is hard to imagine that a sculpture in the street should last forever. When an artist considers this sort of construction, he or she might find the concept of its eternal permanence overwhelming and this is why these projects are often commissioned to artists who, because of their level, do not contemplate too many of the issue's aspects besides the fact that they are being given a public commission that is well paid and that their work will become a point of public reference. What practically none of them dwells on is the possibility that this point of reference might be to bad taste, political absolutism or an urban-planning blunder.

In Vitoria, the experience has borne relatively good results, which is the same as saying that the results were relatively bad. We have not yet finished our work but we can now estimate that city council will remove at least 25% of the public sculptures that are in the city's streets. Many others will be moved to parks on the city's outskirts—newly developed areas whose dwellers will thus also bear witness to the history of recent local sculpture. But maybe the most interesting point of all this is the drafting of bylaws—though, as I have said, nothing is forever—exerting greater control over the future placement of art objects and installations in the street and public spaces, banning donations and ensuring that a committee of experts oversees commissions: a series of measures that stops the city from filling the street with stuff and from turning public art into outdoor furniture.

It goes without saying that some of the city's worst eyesores will remain in place, continuing to occupy a space of privilege along some of the busiest streets. The display of pomp is guaranteed and so are the profits, while the culture of local residents will remain hidden behind the city's curios and scarecrows that biased or blind politicians aspire to turn into absurd symbols of a historic city.

Any public art project should be based on the notion that any work installed in the city must have a social, historical or artistic reason. The quality of the chosen artists should be taken into account in the project's development and also the fact that they are commissions drawn off public funds for everyone's use and enjoyment. It is a greater responsibility than that of individualized creation aimed at museums, collectors, and galleries. We must stop these works, these projects from a singular fate: being forgotten, scorned and left to fall apart.

But the reality is that cities nowadays are chock-full of objects, traffic signals, containers, advertising and—why not? alleged

works of art that do not establish the slightest dialogue either with their immediate setting or the city or its inhabitants. The most immediate solution would be to simply stop installing things in our cities and try to clean them up to leave the space open for architecture, the landscape and people. The next, much more difficult step would be to remove all the sculptures and monuments that really do not establish a space of their own in the urban structure. Eliminate and remove objects and clean up cities to create a space for reflection. Starting from scratch to resituate ourselves within our surroundings and construct the urban landscape of the future.

## **PUBLIC SPACES**

### **Itala Schmelz**

Over the previous panel discussions, we have been able to see that it is impossible to grasp or define the notion of public space from a single point of view, as it is a site of convergence for all sorts of interests. It is a heterogeneous, syncretic space in constant progress, erratic and chaotic, probably impossible to quantify. The city is supposed to be the paradigm of rationality, but it is doubtful nowadays that we could speak of vertical planning. Rather, what we behold is a constantly dissolving context that we can only approach based on fragmentary experiences. However, what we can emphatically state is that we are truly fascinated by both the city and the mass media of our time and that we are perplexed by the rich, complex panorama of the social network that traps and distributes us.

Society nowadays is besieged by the public. Ideology as well as pornography infiltrate homes through the media, while the subliminal voracity of consumerism has overtaken the streets. "Public" cannot be defined as the opposite of "private." We live in a gregarious society, riddled with collective imaginaries. Public space is the place where intersubjectivity settles, where individuals' idiosyncrasies coexist and it is the

point of convergence of common sense. We experience public space pragmatically, but also from the point of view of emotions and memory; it is the place of exchange, dialogue, survival but also the space of economic control, of the coercion of identity, and at the same time, it is the space of thievery and resistance.

We cannot conceive of human beings without the act of communication. In order to understand today's public space it is fundamental to look at the physical and virtual channels that our civilization has built, giving us access to exorbitant quantities of information at ever increasing speed. Public art nowadays is concerned with communicating by using the languages and technological and audiovisual media that constitute the virtual and physical geography in which we live. Moreover, contemporary art—understood as a series of disciplines and interdisciplines that, in essence, is more of a concept than a craft—seeks to involve itself with the city on the level of a privileged order of reading. Artists today cannot remain passive or indifferent to the excess of meaning, to the suggestive symbolic vortex of the places that they travel to and experience.

Transgressing the museum's boundaries, art for the past several generations has struggled against the position to which it has been relegated by utilitarian rationality. I would like to contextualize this round table by emphasizing that the growing interest for public art has to do with our search for a more active role in society based on our own practices, with our desire for dialoguing on equal footing with the present in which we live, and also with our need for considered, critical actions in the complex setting of our times. We are being called to interact in public space. In this panel discussion, we shall directly deal with contemporary-art actions and practices that are currently understood as public art: readings of the context, walks, interventions, what we have come to call deconstructive practices,