

Manifesto for Art: The Public Sphere and the work of the Free art collective

Beyond Art Activism: Rewriting arts Neoliberal Value System

Symposium at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, 26 October 2016

The Public Sphere and the work of the Free art collective

Our work is based on three principles:

- 1 Our participants don't agree with us (or, let's say, we don't assume their agreement and we actively seek to produce disagreement among the participants and between them and us)
- 2 We are not activist artists, we experiment with formats of politicization
- 3 We do not realize the political potential of art by becoming managers

Free's practice is situated within 5 main coordinates, Montage, Text Art, Participation (Participatory art practices), the history of the Avant garde and the culture of political protest (badges, slogans, placards, etc.)

Our enquiry asks what constitutes a public etc. we do not want to limit this to a form of a generalized idea of the public - not merely passersby, spectators / onlookers etc.?

Our art practice proposes that the notion of 'public' in the idiom 'public art' should be understood as a discursive construct as opposed to a physical, spatial understanding as in the term public realm. This revision considers the act of being public as a *process*, a series of inter-subjective temporal experiences, rather than a *spatial* condition. This helps expand art's role from an autonomous field of exhibition making into a position of publishing, thereby recognising art as a contributor to collective opinion formation.

The artworks function to demonstrate the distinctions between a physical, spatial use of the term public and a discursive use of the term public.

According to Habermas' theory the bourgeois public sphere is where collective opinion formation takes place, which can challenge oppressive state bureaucracy as well as capital (Habermas, [1962], 1989).

Collective opinion formation operates as a shared force to monitor the decisions made by the state and the market. To enable collective opinion formation individuals require public forums, arenas of communal interaction where people meet together and discuss the deeds of the state and the market. This can take place in any space, 'private' (in Armenia during 1990s the public sphere took place in the kitchen), 'commercial' (the coffee house) or 'public' (the city square) as long as a collection of individuals are present declaring their opinions on current affairs.

The reason for utilizing public sphere theory is that it enables us to make 3 moves.

First, if we take into account that artworks are published as a consequence of being exhibited then we can understand art as part of the process of opinion (re)formation, thus contributing to a wider reflection upon art's social function. **Second**, by clarifying the distinctions between the terms public space, public good, and public sphere it is revealed that the use of the term 'public' in public art is heavily reliant upon the inherent physical, spatial differences between a primary and secondary audience.

Third, by examining the traditionally accepted polarity between the street (public realm, open access) and the gallery (private, exclusive) it is determined that these spatial conditions are obsolete when establishing whether an artwork is considered public or not, as in the term public art.

Protest Drives History is a twenty metre long banner held by the artists and photographed in a quarry in Shropshire. It is one of a series of artworks that utilise 'the slogan' to evoke a counter-public sphere. A billboard poster of the image was originally installed at the Institute of Contemporary Art, London whilst at the same time presented on three commercial billboard sites across London, UK.

Protest Drives History – we decided that we wanted to put this text in a space that was outside of an institution/ building but private - i.e. no passer-by's, no primary audience for us this provides a way to problematize what is it and who is it we consider a public.

One of the ways that debate within a counter-public sphere leads to action is through political slogans. The slogan has always been a potent element of the counter public sphere. Whether chanted during a march or printed onto handheld banners, slogans mobilize groups and ritualize their communal bonds by publicizing their common interests, motives and beliefs. From the banners carried by the French Revolutionary army (e.g. 'Live Free or Die'), to the slogans of the Suffragette movement (eg. 'Votes for Women'),

and the campaigning slogans used today (e.g. 'No Blood for Oil', 'Make Poverty History'), slogans call for individual action for collective goods. Slogans state collectively sanctioned actions, but in addition they are also performative acts that play a vital part in the formation and maintenance of protest and political action.

We utilize slogans and yet none of our texts are actual slogans in the strict Leninist sense of the word, but we model our use of language on the way that slogans operate performatively.

We do not only think of the slogans in our work as rooted in political protest but also in a tradition of text art which we reorient in order to rethink the idea of the public. Our first function works were anonymous statements that problematized the function of public art but since we have gone on to use the slogan differently

Slogans ask for things to change. It is a common misconception today that slogans are authoritarian, illiberal and restrictive. Stokely Carmichael would have never used the slogan 'Black is Beautiful' if he thought it simply stated a fact that we could understand without first changing ourselves and the world. The feminist slogan 'the Personal is Political', likewise, would only make sense once feminism had transformed our understanding of each of its keywords. If black is already (universally understood as) beautiful then we do not need the slogan 'Black is Beautiful', and if the personal is already (secured as) political then we do not need the slogan 'the Personal is Political'. Slogans do not describe the world they call up a new world to take its place.

The history of Liberal Democracy promotes the value of consensus in order to arrive at agreement and collective decisions in a seemingly reasonable and rational way. A public sphere calls for debate and allows for dissensus but dissensus needs to be managed and fought for. For those of us committed to the idea of the public sphere (be it a counter-public sphere as opposed to the 'official' public sphere) and notions of dissensus, the first setback is that dissensus is not the opposite of consensus; it just doesn't operate in the same privileged way.

Mel Jordan, Free art collective, 26 October 2016

A Manifesto for Art was then read as a spoken choir to those that wanted to participate.