Thoughts on Public Art
Now That The Course is Over.

by Nic Ruley

If I were asked in late January whether or not I made works of public art, I would have replied affirmatively. Now, however, I can answer with a resounding no. I don’t think that this shift in thought has anything to do with a change in my own process as much as it has to do with how I now consider public art. With that discourse, I see a spectrum of merits, each of which should be considered separately, but which ultimately place the work as ‘more public’ or ‘less public’. I want to talk about each of these in detail, after which, I would like to look at my art making practice in a similar context.

The elements I refer to are access, audience, and author. I still think that these are the most fundamental issues in any discussion into the public nature of public art, but it’s important to add a qualifier to the mix that can best be boiled down to the most daunting and frustrating question in the academy: Is it art? I bring this into the discussion as a ‘pre-question’, because if you decide that you are not looking at a piece of art, then there is almost no purpose at all in discussing its merits as a piece of public art. But we have to flesh this out right away with a thumbs up or a thumbs down approach.

The argument could be broken down again and again, discussing form and structure and intent, but for our purposes, we are really just trying to weed out the wooden chairs from the Joseph Kosuths. And this is not a vain exercise in snobbery. On the contrary much of the merits discussed in a piece of public art can also be found in the everyday utilitarian object. Indeed, if anything can be art, we may find that utilitarian objects such as a sidewalk are the best kind of public art. So let’s weed out those things and move on.

Once the decision has been made to canonize the piece as art its qualities can be discussed individually. I suggest that the first matter to take into consideration is access. If a work is to be considered public, then there must be a degree
of access to it both physically and conceptually, with the idea being that the more access one has to a piece, the more public it is.

There will almost always be geographical accessibility issues, but can anyone located in proximity to the piece access it? Does this piece take a person’s physical ability into consideration? Are there financial challenges to the accessibility of a work? These questions start to get into some social ‘isms’ that do need to be addressed when making work. A blind person won’t have visual access to a painting. The Spiral Jetty in Utah is not wheelchair accessible. Performances in Second Life aren’t available to those who don’t have financial means to have access to a computer.

How often can the public view the piece? Who controls where and when the piece is viewed? The most public works, naturally, would be open to anyone who wants to see it at any time, but this is frequently not the case due to fears of vandalism. Street murals would exist at the most accessible end of this spectrum whereas The Statue of Liberty would exist at the more restrictive end.

Can the public access the concept of the piece? Does the piece make sense to the people who view it? Does the public need to ‘know’ something before work is able to be understood? Conceptual access is as important as physical access. If the public can see the work anytime they want but they can’t relate to it, the piece will fail at being a successful piece. In my opinion, a lot of so called ‘plop art’ falls victim to being emotionally inaccessible. Though I can appreciate Richard Serra’s Tilted Arc, I can’t really see how the public was able to understand what it was doing in the space which I believe helped lead to its demise.

After the access of the piece has been fully investigated, I would move into the issue of audience. I am a firm believer that public art should be made with the the most populist definition of the public in mind. So, a perfect example of public art would be one that was made specifically for every single person in the world. Naturally, the intended audience is going to start to shrink as the piece is being made, but being mindful of keeping a piece strongly populist makes it significantly more public.

Simply asked, who is the intended audience of your piece? How have you worked the factors of accessibility into your piece in order to reach your desired audience? Look at Anish Kapoor’s Cloud Gate in direct contrast to The World’s Largest Cross in Effingham, Il.
Kapoor’s piece was designed to engage any audience member who walked through the space whereas the Cross is directed at a specifically Christian audience, or at least an audience with a grasp on Christian dogma. In this manner, Could Gate would be a more public piece.

The final point of investigation for me is the author. In most art making practices, either a single artist or a small group working collaboratively create and develop a piece. Over the course of the semester, however, I was realizing that in the case of public art, this sphere can open dramatically. Even on the most basic level, an artist hoping to get a public commission most likely has to open up his or her process to a committee. Does this make the committee members collaborators? Not quite. But their suggestion and approvals influence the manner in which the work is made, thereby taking some control away from the artist and the art-making process itself becomes more public. In more explicit cases, artists may open up a considerably larger portion of their practice to the public.

The performance artist Miranda July and others developed learningtoloveyoumore.com in 2002. Though the artists had full control over creating assignments, the implementation and documentation was up to the public. So did the public fully control the creation of everything? No. But this opening of the process speaks to a more public way of making and understanding art.

Put this more public idea of authorship against Greyworld’s Colourstops. Greyworld is a collective of artists and the piece was awarded a commission and a grant, but that is where the public nature of its creation ended. The artists made the decisions of the piece
and it wasn’t seen or discussed with the public until its unveiling. I discuss this not as a judgement of the work itself, just to the work’s public nature.

Though I have come to the conclusion that my work lives in the non-public art corner, I think that looking at it as to where it fits into the spectrum is important, as it gives a broader reading to the work and forces me to make more specific and definable choices. Though I work to have a relatively high amount of access to my theater work and performance art, I can see that there is an avant garde that must be understood in relation to modernist absurdism. This is not to say that it can’t be enjoyed by a wide audience, but to fully understand most of my work conceptually, a working understanding of 20th century performance practices are pretty important. This comes through in my process as well, where I attempt to approach a very specific audience who would have that working vocabulary. In other words, I try not to explain the foundation or rationale of absurdity as a form and make no apologies for my use of it.

Looking at my process in on the spectrum of the ‘public author’ is a bit trickier. Many of my productions involve a larger cast with moments of structured improvisation where the performers must bring some of their own vocabulary to the performance. In this way, a larger and more collaborative body are forming the finalized piece. This still isn’t very public, thinking in relation to Augusto Boal’s Theater of the Oppressed, where the audience and performer merge into a single unified body of multiple voices.

So although I don’t make public art, it’s still important for me as an artist and critic and consumer of art to be able to discuss categorization and merits of work. This understanding is helpful as way to see any work in context for the purposes of expanding the discourse and finding deeper meaning and understanding.