



CULTURAL PILGRIMAGES AND METAPHORIC JOURNEYS } *Suzanne Lacy*

MAPPING THE TERRAIN

*New Genre Public Art*

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*Artists and writers throughout the continent are currently involved in a . . . redefinition of our continental topography. We imagine either a map of the Americas without borders, a map turned upside down, or one in which . . . borders are organically drawn by geography, culture, and immigration, not by the capricious fingers of economic domination.*

—Guillermo Gómez-Peña

For the past three or so decades visual artists of varying backgrounds and perspectives have been working in a manner that resembles political and social activity but is distinguished by its aesthetic sensibility. Dealing with some of the most profound issues of our time—toxic waste, race relations, homelessness, aging, gang warfare, and cultural identity—a group of visual artists has developed distinct models for an art whose public strategies of engagement are an important part of its aesthetic language. The source of these artworks' structure is not exclusively visual or political information, but rather an internal necessity perceived by the artist in collaboration with his or her audience.

We might describe this as “new genre public art,” to distinguish it in both form and intention from what has been called “public art”—a term used for the past twenty-five years to describe sculpture and installations sited in public places. Unlike much of what has heretofore been called public art, new genre public art—visual art that uses both traditional and nontraditional media to communicate and interact with a broad and diversified audience about issues directly relevant to their lives—is based on engagement. (As artist Jo Hanson suggests, “Much of what has been called public art might better be defined as private indulgence. Inherently public art is social intervention.”)<sup>1</sup> The term “new genre” has been used since the

late sixties to describe art that departs from traditional boundaries of media. Not specifically painting, sculpture, or film, for example, new genre art might include combinations of different media. Installations, performances, conceptual art, and mixed-media art, for example, fall into the new genre category, a catchall term for experimentation in both form and content. Attacking boundaries, new genre *public* artists draw on ideas from vanguard forms, but they add a developed sensibility about audience, social strategy, and effectiveness that is unique to visual art as we know it today.

Although not often included in discussions about public art, such artists adopt “public” as their operative concept and quest. According to critic Patricia C. Phillips, “In spite of the many signs of retreat and withdrawal, most people remain in need of and even desirous of an invigorated, active idea of public. But what the contemporary polis will be is inconclusive.” This indeterminacy has developed as a major theme in new genre public art. The nature of audience—in traditional art taken to be just about everyone—is now being rigorously investigated in practice and theory. Is “public” a qualifying description of place, ownership, or access? Is it a subject, or a characteristic of the particular audience? Does it explain the intentions of the artist or the interests of the audience? The inclusion of the public connects theories of art to the broader population: what exists in the space between the words public and art is an unknown relationship between artist and audience, a relationship that may *itself* become the artwork.

Whether or not this work is “art” may be the central question to some. Modernist assumptions about art’s necessary disengagement from “the masses” die hard, although multiple examples during the past twenty or more years imply deep interaction between “high art” and popular culture. During the seventies, for instance, Lowell Darling ran for governor of the state of California, in a performance that won him almost sixty thousand votes in the primaries. At the same time Judith F. Baca intervened in gang warfare in East Los Angeles with her mural project *Mi Abuelita*. Appropriated, performative, conceptual, transient, and even interactive art are all accepted by art world critics as long as there appears to be no real possibility of social change. The underlying aversion to art that claims to

“do” something, that does not subordinate function to craft, presents a resonant dilemma for new genre public artists. That their work intends to affect and transform is taken by its detractors as evidence that it is not art. As we will see in this book, however, the issues raised by this work are much more profound for the field of art than such reductivism implies.

#### ALTERNATIVE CARTOGRAPHY: PUBLIC ART’S HISTORIES

Depending on how one begins the record, public art has a history as ancient as cave painting or as recent as the Art in Public Places Program of the National Endowment for the Arts. While no overview has been agreed upon yet, a quasi-official history of recent public art in the United States can be tracked through commissions, distribution of percent-for-art monies, articles, conferences, and panel discussions. But with history as well as maps, the construction of meaning depends on who is doing the making.

#### *Art in Public Places*

One version of history, then, begins with the demise of what Judith Baca calls the “cannon in the park” idea of public art—the display of sculptures glorifying a version of national history that excluded large segments of the population. The cannon in the park was encroached upon by the world of high art in the sixties, when the outdoors, particularly in urban areas, came to be seen as a potential new exhibition space for art previously found in galleries, museums, and private collections. In the most cynical view, the impetus was to expand the market for sculpture, and this included patronage from corporations. The ability of art to enhance public spaces such as plazas, parks, and corporate headquarters was quickly recognized as a way to revitalize inner cities, which were beginning to collapse under the burden of increasing social problems. Art in public places was seen as a means of reclaiming and humanizing the urban environment.

For all intents and purposes, the contemporary activity in public art dates from the establishment of the Art in Public Places Program at the National Endowment for the Arts in 1967 and the subsequent formation of state and city percent-for-art programs.<sup>2</sup> Governmental funding seemed

to promise democratic participation and to promote public rather than private interests. These goals were nominally achieved by selection panels of arts and civic representatives appointed by the mayor, who, “as the representative of all the people,” was initially enlisted to authorize NEA applications. The late sixties and early seventies were the era of the civic art collection that related more to art history than to city or cultural history, and which fulfilled the NEA goal “to give the public access to the best art of our time outside museum walls.” These works, which were commissioned from maquettes and closely resembled smaller-scale versions in collections, moved the private viewing experience of the museum outdoors. Festivals, rallies, or other plaza gatherings were supplemental to the art, but were not communal activities integral to it. Because these works were art monuments indicative of the author’s personal manner of working, not cultural monuments symbolic of contemporary society, the ensuing public debate centered on artistic style (e.g., abstract versus figurative art) rather than on public values.

Throughout the seventies administrators and arts activists lobbied for percent-for-art programs, and these, combined with NEA grants and private sector money, fueled public art. The size of commissions created a viable alternative to the gallery system for some artists. In time, and partly because of the pressure to explain the work to an increasingly demanding public, a new breed of arts administrator emerged to smooth the way between artists, trained in modernist strategies of individualism and innovation, and the various representatives of the public sector. Collaboration with other professionals, research, and consultative interaction with civic groups and communities became more common, and teams of artists, architects, designers, and administrators were formed. Except in unusual circumstances, the full creative and cooperative potential of such teams rarely materialized.

More commissions and scrutiny brought further bureaucratization in what curator Patricia Fuller has identified as “the public art establishment . . . [with] an increasing tendency toward complication and rigidification of processes, the codification of a genre called public art, [and] ideas of professionalism which admit artists and administrators to the

fraternity. This all seems to have created an apparatus which can only be justified by the creation of permanent objects.”

According to Fuller, early in the seventies some artists and administrators in the field began to differentiate between “public art”—a sculpture in a public space—and “art in public places,” a focus on the location or space for the art. Beginning in 1974, the NEA stressed that the work should also be “appropriate to the immediate site,” and by 1978 applicants were encouraged “to approach creatively the wide range of possibilities for art in public situations.”<sup>3</sup> The NEA encouraged proposals that integrated art into the site and that moved beyond the monumental steel object-off-the-pedestal to adopt any permanent media, including earthworks, environmental art, and nontraditional media such as artificial lights.

Some artists saw public art as an opportunity to command the entire canvas, as it were, to allow them to operate with a singular and uncompromised vision. Site-specific art, as such art in public places began to be called, was commissioned and designed for a particular space, taking into account the physical and visual qualities of the site. As site became a key element in public art, the mechanisms by which works were commissioned also required revision.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, in the eighties the NEA tried to promote the artist’s direct participation in the choice and planning of the site. By 1982 the Visual Arts and Design programs had joined forces to encourage “the interaction of visual artists and design professionals through the exploration and development of new collaborative models.”

Scott Burton, one of the most recognized public artists in this period, believed that “what architecture or design or public art have in common is their social function or content. . . . Probably the culminating form of public art will be some kind of social planning, just as earthworks are leading us to a new notion of art as landscape architecture.”<sup>5</sup> Eventually, as the practice matured, artists turned their attention to the historical, ecological, and sociological aspects of the site, although usually only metaphorically, and without engaging audiences in a way markedly different from in a museum.

By the late eighties public art had become a recognizable field. Conferences were held, and a small body of literature, dealing for the most

part with bureaucratic and administrative issues, considered the complexities of the interface between visual artists and the public.<sup>6</sup> NEA guidelines of 1979 had called for a demonstration of “methods to insure an informed community response to the project.”<sup>7</sup> This directive was extended in 1983 to include planning activities “to educate and prepare the community” and “plans for community involvement, preparation, and dialogue.” By the beginning of the nineties, the NEA encouraged “educational activities which invite community involvement.”<sup>8</sup>

At the same time, the economic downturn, deepening urban troubles, and a new distrust of art led to attacks on public art and its funding sources. Provocative situations marked the last years of the eighties, most notably the controversy surrounding Richard Serra’s *Tilted Arc*, when office workers’ demands to remove the sculpture from its site in a civic plaza led to calls for greater public accountability by artists. As the conventions of artistic expression continued to come into conflict with public opinion, the presentation of an artist’s plans to community groups became de rigueur. This in turn compelled a greater reliance on the intermediary skills of the public arts administrator, since social interaction was neither the forte nor the particular aesthetic interest of many established public artists. Thus skills were differentiated, and artists were able to maintain an aesthetic stance apart from notions of public education.

From the beginning, public art has been nurtured by its association with various institutions and, by extension, the art market. Although the move to exhibit art in public places was a progressive one, the majority of artists accommodated themselves to the established museum system, continuing to focus their attention on art critics and museum-going connoisseurs. The didactic aspects of art were relegated to the museum education department. “What too many artists did was to parachute into a place and displace it with art,” comments Jeff Kelley. “Site specificity was really more like the imposition of a kind of disembodied museum zone onto what already had been very meaningful and present before that, which was the place.”

In recent years, artists, administrators, and critics alike have looked at this progression from objects in museums, to objects in public places, to

site-specific installations and have framed present social and political artworks within the context of this essentially formalist movement. They have understood the emergence of collaborative notions in art as a reflection of “design teams,” modeled after architectural practices. (Most public artists who developed within the preceding historical progression have worked closely with landscape architects, designers, and architects.) However, it is the premise of this book that an alternative reading of the history of the past thirty years results in a different interpretation of these same present concerns. Indeed, many of the artists listed in the compendium of this book had been working for years outside the purview of the accepted public art and art in public places narrative, dominated as it was by sculpture. Artists as diverse as Allan Kaprow, Anna Halprin, and Hans Haacke in the sixties and Lynn Hershman, Judy Chicago, Adrian Piper, and Judith Baca in the seventies were operating under different assumptions and aesthetic visions. Not easily classifiable within a discourse dominated by objects, their work was considered under other rubrics, such as political, performance, or media art; hence the broader implications for both art and society were unexplored by art criticism.

#### *Art in the Public Interest?*

An alternative history of today’s public art could be read through the development of various vanguard groups, such as feminist, ethnic, Marxist, and media artists and other activists. They have a common interest in leftist politics, social activism, redefined audiences, relevance for communities (particularly marginalized ones), and collaborative methodology. By re-visioning history through the lens of these interests, rather than artistic media-specific concerns, we understand the present moment, new genre public art, and its implications for art making in a way that focuses our critical investigation.

We might begin in the late fifties, when artists challenged the conventions of galleries and museums through Happenings and other experiments with what was to become known as popular culture. Allan Kaprow has recounted his version of that history. The artists “appropriated the

real environment and not the studio, garbage and not fine paints and marble. They incorporated technologies that hadn't been used in art. They incorporated behavior, the weather, ecology, and political issues. In short, the dialogue moved from knowing more and more about what art was to wondering about what life was, the meaning of life."

Over the next decades popular culture, which included the media and its mass audience, became more attractive to artists. In the seventies artists such as Chris Burden, Ant Farm, Lowell Darling, Leslie Labowitz, and myself interrupted television broadcast programming with performances (Shu Lea Cheang later called them "media break-ins"). During the subsequent decade, media-related art was more analytic than activist, but the relative availability of media and its possibilities of scale encouraged artists to think more critically about audiences. The relationship between mass culture, media, and engaged art was recognized by Lynn Hershman: "The images and values of the culture that produces the [television] programs invade the subconscious cultural identity of its viewers. It's essential that the dialogue becomes two-way and interactive, respects and invites multiple points of view."

The connection between an activist view of culture and new genre public art had been forged during the Vietnam War protests of the late sixties by U.S. artists who were in turn influenced by political activists.<sup>10</sup> At the same moment, also drawing from the radical nature of the times, women artists on the West Coast, led by Judy Chicago, developed feminist art education programs.<sup>11</sup> Activist art grew out of the general militancy of the era, and identity politics was part of it. Women and ethnic artists began to consider their identities—key to the new political analysis—central to their aesthetic in some as yet undefined manner. Both groups began with a consciousness of their community of origin as their primary audience.

Ethnic artists such as Judith Baca worked in ghettos and barrios with specific constituencies, struggling to bring together their often highly developed art-school aesthetic with the aesthetics of their own cultures. Emphasizing their roles as communicators, these artists drew upon their heritage for an art language, such as public murals, that would speak to their people. Their work reflected this bridging of European and ethnic

cultures, and they became particularly adept at translation and cultural critique. Almost invariably this led to activism. According to Yolanda López, "In an era when the state has disintegrated to the degree where it can no longer attend to the needs of the people, artists who work in the community need to consciously develop organizing and critical skills among the people with whom they work." For this they were called "community artists," and critics refused to take their work seriously.

"The personal is political" was the koan of the feminist art movement, meaning that personal revelation, through art, could be a political tool. The seventies brought a high degree of visibility to women's issues. Feminist art, based in activism, grew out of a theoretical framework provided by Judy Chicago, the most visible feminist artist from that era, along with others including Miriam Schapiro, Arlene Raven, Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, Mary Beth Edelson, June Wayne, and Lucy Lippard. Chicago thought that the suppression of an empowered female identity through popular culture's misrepresentations could be counteracted by articulate identity constructions in art. In this way, art making was connected both to a broad public and to action.

Moving into the public sector through the use of public space, including the media, was inevitable for artists who sought to inform and change. Because of their activist origin, feminist artists were concerned with questions of effectiveness. They had fairly sophisticated conceptions of the nature of an expanded audience, including how to reach it, support its passage through new and often difficult material, and assess its transformation or change as a result of the work. Seeing art as a neutral meeting ground for people of different backgrounds, feminists in the seventies attempted artistic crossovers among races and classes. Collaboration was a valued practice of infinitely varying possibilities, one that highlighted the relational aspects of art. By the end of the seventies feminists had formulated precise activist strategies and aesthetic criteria for their art.

Though their art was not based in identity politics, other political artists were working during the seventies. Marxist artists in particular used photography and text to portray and analyze labor. They interacted with the audience by interviewing workers, constructing collective narratives,

and exhibiting those narratives within the labor community. Their analysis extended to a critique of art and its markets as well and was exhibited in museums and art magazines. For the most part, the theoretical aspects of this work were more developed than its activism until the mid-eighties, and while the work's analysis was comprehensive, it often didn't attempt actual change. Martha Rosler and Fred Lonidier, however, are among several whose work was interactive from the beginning.

Throughout the seventies, considerable but often unacknowledged exchange occurred among ethnic, feminist, and Marxist artists, particularly on the West Coast, making it difficult to attribute ideas to one group or another. That people were simultaneously members of more than one group also accounted for cross-influences. It is safe to say, however, that working during the same decade and within earshot of each other, these artists reached similar conclusions from different vantage points, and these conclusions about the nature of art as communication and the articulation of specific audiences form the basis for new genre public art.

#### *Recent History: Calls to Action*

This construction of a history of new genre public art is not built on a typology of materials, spaces, or artistic media, but rather on concepts of audience, relationship, communication, and political intention. It is my premise that the real heritage of the current moment in public art came from the discourses of largely marginalized artists. However visible the above cited "movements" were, they were not linked to each other, to a centralized art discourse, or to public art itself until the late eighties. Four factors conspired to narrow the distance between our two historical narratives and bring about an interest in a more public art.

First, increased racial discrimination and violence were part of the eighties conservative backlash. As immigration swelled the ranks of ethnic populations, their new political power and articulate spokespersons brought ethnicity to the attention, if not the agenda, of the U.S. public. The introduction of diversity raised profound questions about culture itself. Visual artists, participating in international artistic and literary ex-

changes, expressed the shifts in cultural expectations of people of color throughout the world. "What if," mused Guillermo Gómez-Peña, "our internationalism was no longer defined by New York, Paris, Berlin, or even Mexico City but . . . between San Antonio and Bangkok?" "The geographical is political" became the new koan of political artists.

A second factor in the political conservatism of the eighties and early nineties was the attempt to circumscribe the gains women had made during the previous decades. Antiabortion forces gathered momentum as an increasingly conservative Supreme Court threatened constitutional attacks on abortion rights. Several events, including Anita Hill's testimony on sexual harassment at the televised hearings for Clarence Thomas's Supreme Court nomination, reignited a national discussion of women's rights. In the nineties artists were once again working with issues of gender violence, echoing feminist artists of the seventies, but this time the makers included both men and women.

Not surprisingly, given the political climate, the end of the eighties saw an exercise in cultural censorship on a scale not known since the fifties. This third factor is closely linked to the first two. Censorship efforts of politicians in league with conservative fundamentalists targeted women, ethnic, and homosexual artists. The attacks made abundantly clear the connections between the rights of these social groups and those of artists in general, evoking an almost unilateral response from the art world. These attacks on publicly visible artworks, most of which were temporary or photographic (but also included Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party*), created a lasting and chilling influence on public art.

Finally, interest in new forms of public art was provoked by deepening health and ecological crises. Concerned about AIDS, pollution, and environmental destruction, artists began looking for strategies to raise awareness. Artists with AIDS brought the disease into the gallery, literally and figuratively, and AIDS activists staged street actions inspired by performance art of the sixties and seventies. Environmental crises were the subject of artworks in diverse media, including photo-texts, paintings, installations, and performances.

Although in theory new genre public art might be made by those at either end of the political spectrum, both the history of avant-garde forms upon which it draws and the social background of those attracted to its practice effectively position this work as liberal or radical. The issues just cited—opposition to racism, violence against women, censorship, AIDS, and ecological damage, for example—are as much a recounting of a traditional leftist agenda as they are the subject matter of new genre public art.

Within the ranks of the artists who have contributed to this alternative public art history are several who, having predicted the current social and aesthetic situation in their work, have created their own road maps. Concerned with issues of race, gender, sexuality, ecology, and urbanization, for twenty years in some cases, their theoretical perspectives and activist strategies were well developed. These artists, most of whom are included in the compendium, were quickly held up by members of the “official” public art establishment as models for a new form of public art. Unfortunately, this sporadic recognition and the failure to understand the history of these artists’ concerns and influences have disassociated them from their radical heritage. This dismemberment has allowed us to continue along a critical “blind path” without coherent theories uniting aesthetic, personal, and political goals. This book, in attempting to reframe an extensive body of work, suggests that new genre public art is not only about subject matter, and not only about placement or site for art, but about the aesthetic expression of activated value systems. “The new public art is not so much a movement of the nineties, a new way of working, as a way of working that has found its time,” reflects independent curator Mary Jane Jacob.