

A POSTCOLONIAL GAZE ON MONUMENTALITY

THE NEED FOR INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES

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SUMMARY

This article is a reflection on a master thesis. The article tries to unravel some of the interdisciplinary keys present in the work and necessary for the development of research on Public Space and Public Art.

At the same time argues in favor of “post colonial” reading over the-produced space by the colonial powers, both in terms of its structural dimension and in the dimension of “decorum” .

RESUMEN

Este artículo supone una reflexión sobre una tesis de master. El artículo pretende desentrañar algunas de las claves interdisciplinarias presentes en el trabajo y necesarias para el desarrollo de investigaciones sobre el Espacio Público y Arte Público.

Al mismo tiempo plantea la pertinencia de lecturas “post coloniales” sobre el espacio producido –tanto en su dimensión estructural cuanto en su dimensión de “decorum”- por las potencias coloniales

The article discussing 1930’s and 1940’s ideas, challenges, and practices of monumentality and public space in Lourenço Marques (Maputo, Mozambique) that appears in this issue of “on the w@terfront” is part of the master thesis presented by Gerbert Verheij to the MA degree in Art History of Universidade Nova Lisboa (FCSH).

This thesis was the result of a shared supervision, not always easy as its two advisors were coming from different supervision “cultures”. Nevertheless we believe the result is remarkable.

The analysis of Gerbert’s thesis attributes can be found in the article by Professor Abreu, who acted as jury in its presentation. In this essay, we do not intend to dis-

cuss Gerbert's work specificities and merits, but to frame it in a broader context: the trends in research on public art.

A while back, Tom Finkelpearl claimed that *"In the long view, the history of art is the history of public art"* (2000), perhaps unaware that several years before, G.C.Argan (1980) had widened this very idea, reckoning the History of Art "as" the History of the city.

These two references introduce us to the most common pathways followed in the study of public art. A main stream places public art in the context of "Art", given rise to monographic studies on authors, currents, styles, or aesthetics. Concurrently, a less explored field of research takes public art as part of the city and acknowledges its role in the processes of urbanization. It also acknowledges its ability to enhance social identity processes, as well as to expand the symbolic dimension of the city. So, on the one hand we have an "art-oriented" research, and on the other hand an "urban-oriented" research.

Although these extreme approaches are the most common, one should not forget another current line of research, "citizen-oriented", focusing rather on the impact and value of public art works from an anthropological, psychological or sociological perspectives, as well as from the perspective of the role of citizens in decision-making on the modification of their environment (studies on the role of public art in the process of social empowerment or city governance).

These three rather different possibilities of approaching the same material object (the work of public art) create serious problems at theoretical and methodological levels, especially when an accurate identification of the formal subject of study is necessary. As is well known, epistemology upholds the distinction between material object and formal object. Thus, a sculpture, e.g. "David" by Michelangelo, can be considered either formally, or from the perspective of its materiality and be of interest in studies of chemistry, materials engineering, and restoration, the latter supported by the previous studies. This sculpture might also be object of study in art history (in its many ways of writing), art theory, aesthetics... or anthropology, sociology of culture, economy, and psychology of perception.... In each case, the studied "David" will be a different one, and will require different methods and specific approaches. When "David" is considered from the perspective of public art, it prompts a number of other dimensions related to the urban composition, from the history of the city and the urban role of the monument, to its metrics and proportion, etc., that require other methodological devices?.

In addition, to frame the formal object in a specific disciplinary context, is over determined by certain beliefs inherent in the historical construction of each disciplinary field. So in an "art-oriented" perspective, the assumption of art's autonomy might explain why, for instance, it is so hard to find studies that acknowledge "David"'s complex status, as an element of urban decorum at the Signoria Square in Florence. This belief persists even in recent studies on public art that might be called post-modern, because *"(relative) autonomy is the condition for critical art, for an art of resistance"* (Leal, J. Cunha 2010:43).

In turn, the “urban-oriented” trend can be over determined by the modern conviction that improving the built environment has a direct influence on social and individual behaviour. This conviction surely shares some sociological and psychological beliefs, particularly in the field of environmental psychology.

Finally, the “citizen-oriented” trend might also fall in pre-concepts based on economism, psychologism, sociologism and, from an anthropological perspective, on ethnocentrism.

The difficulty in fitting research on public art in that disciplinary context has been keenly identified (Remesar,2011; Remesar,A- Ricart,N, 2010), and the need to review the theoretical basis that support studies on public art has also been addressed, mainly the “giant gap between art theory and those art practices that do not fit into the vindications of autonomy. (*Needless to say that, in Adorno’s negative aesthetics, this would be nothing but the gap between art and cultural industry, or, in other words, between art and non-art*). *Public art is a particularly suited field to look into if one has this gap in mind.*” (Leal, J. Cunha 2010, 43-44)

Meanwhile, P. Brandão (vid. Brandão 2006, 2011a, 2011b) has been claiming for an interdisciplinary perspective to address the issues of urban design and, within it, of public art. If one understands interdisciplinarity as a way to solve problems and to answer questions one can easily reckon that they cannot be answered or addressed by using a single method or approach (Klein, 1990). In other words, it is fairly recognizable that the construction of formal objects for the study of public art and urban design cannot be built exclusively from the specific views of consolidated disciplines. The object must be addressed from the perspective of a “question” or “problem” that, by definition, is multifaceted and cannot be analysed or discussed from a single point of view.

Thus, an interdisciplinary approach to a problem, both on the level of a intervention project or for research purposes, presupposes certain requirements.

First, it is necessary to understand that an interdisciplinary approach can only occur when a “mental state” allows the researcher to question the material object, instead of projecting into the physical object questions arising from a specific disciplinary framework. In a way, a return to certain parameters of an inductive method is needed and, too, to “park” those derived from deduction.

Second, it is necessary that the researcher exceeds a multidisciplinary approach, i.e. approaches that gather partial “autonomous” answers from different disciplinary fields. This kind of studies that try to respond to a multifaceted subject by working separately its different facets – both conceptually and methodologically – assuming as a result the sum of contributions do not correspond to the idea of interdisciplinarity one has in mind.

Let us go back to Gerbert’s research. The work puts forward different queries on the physical object, in this case the statutory public art set up in Maputo during the colonial period. “Several questions *may arise*. *What is the “readability” of this art*

assumed to be “national”? What are the implications of abstract architectural concepts such as “greatness” or “order” when, through architecture or sculpture, are developed in a specific way, for a specific space? What is the meaning of the statement of the “scenic” character of the spaces produced by the architecture, urban design and public sculpture? To which spatial organization they serve these interventions, what they are linking and what they are dividing? What social practices and specific uses they inform? To these questions we can add other issues like which idea of the city they represent? And, why the recovery of certain “academic” values?”

These questions follow the complexity of their object of inquiry. Some of them are framed in a socio-political perspective, referring to the problematic value of the concept of “nationality” in a colonized territory. Others deal with related factors in city building and the relationship between “site” and the canonical programme for the construction of the city. Others wonder about the relationship between “ornament” and “artwork” and finally, the problem of spatial practices through urban design and public art is presented.

The formulation of these questions requires organizing a complex theoretical and methodological framework. It is necessary to ponder on architecture, sculpture, politics, and art theory, as well as on many historical subjects. Therefore, it is mandatory to go back to various disciplinary fields in order to study this kind of object. Thus, the methodological framework that arises does not belong to a single discipline. Rather, it is a kind of “ad hoc construction” supported by an awareness to specific parameters: timeline, atlas, the main theories about the monument, historical data framework, an analysis on policies during colonization and the role played by the monument in the construction of a vicarious memory, an analysis of forms, strategies of representation and rituals implied by the cases studied. These parameters are not simple shards, as the final result of this research is definitely not the result of a simple sum, for the consistent study of the public space operates as “glue” of all fields of inquiring, assuring the conceptual solidity of the entire undertaking.

This thesis follows the trail started a while ago, in the CR POLIS at the University of Barcelona (Elias, 2006; Ricart, 2009; Hernández, 2009; Aguas, 2009; Hamman, 2011, Crouse, 2011; Ochoa, 2011) and in the Department of Art History, Universidade Nova de Lisboa (Abreu, 2006; Câmara, 2009). All these works pursue, with greater or lesser success, the study of Public Art from an intended “interdisciplinary” standpoint. Although some can be seen as slightly committed to “art-oriented”, “urban-oriented”, or “citizen-oriented” perspectives, they all share the desire to “open” the subject of study, and to achieve an integrated and multifaceted understanding of a reality that is not exhausted, that does not fit into the straitjacket of a single disciplinary view. They all warn about the danger of a “unique thinking” (Ramonet, 1995; Arantes et al. 2002), one that intends to explain and exhaust a complex and multifactorial “domain”.

All these works introduce methodological approaches that require innovation and rigor. Sometimes they operate by borrowing tools from already established disciplinary fields, others “re-inventing” work procedures, either by “merging”, i.e. orga-

nizing a consistent methodological device composed of parts of other methodological approaches, or by “decontextualization”, i.e. by appropriating methodological devices from other disciplines, placing them in a new context.

Anyhow, as with Gerbert’s thesis, they operate without losing track of a fundamental methodological principle: the delimitation of the subject matter, its formal definition, claims for a specific methodological device. Unfortunately, institutional restrictions in the moment we define a work program are too heavy and tend to respond to the pressures of the institution, regardless of the complexity of the subject in which one tries to bring some light into.

Thus, the ability to move forward depends on the imaginative and creative ability of specific works, as well as on the capacity of institutions (faculties, departments, research centres...) to “open up” new perspectives of work, leaving the security of the “discipline” in favour of the more unstable, but promising, territory of interdisciplinarity. Cooperation between institutions is, in this sense, essential. In our case, the facts prove it and the process of cooperation is likely to continue in doctoral programs of the respective Institutions as in ongoing research projects.

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