

UNIVERSITY OF PÉCS

FACULTY OF ARTS

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**Public art:  
the democratization of art appearing in  
public sites**

DLA értekezés

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## ***Objective***

The road which guided my interest to the field of public art in retrospect seems to be a quite logical process. One step was followed by another, having me take up a generational role as well. However, this role is not an exclusive one, since regarding materials and concepts even until today the vast majority of the contemporary Hungarian sculptors represent either the traditional, the representative or the modernist sculpture. It was amazing to me – however, in theory it seems to be quite obvious, which it is – that the personal artistic development explicitly follows the significant changes of art styles and ideas of the 20th century. In my own practice I have reached almost all of those theoretical cross-roads the modern art passed through. I came to that point slowly – what I assume all artists get to – the practical and beneficial opportunities of my own art. As I view these issues rather pragmatically, I was eager to put the concept of social usefulness in my own practice. Thus I arrived to public art merely by groping, which is not the only organizing force of my activity today, but in the DLA training period it certainly was.

## ***Scope***

Traditionally, the three-dimensional artwork and the spatial actions of art play an adequate role in community experiences, as meaningful accessories of social representation.

In these situations, the object or the actions get into a powerful and pre-established cultural context, to be almost always forced in any kind of interaction. Therefore the space, - especially in the public space, but partially the isolated gallery space as well,- has worked like a pre-defined cultural / historical visual network linked to the subject in certain points.

From the concept described above, and from the thesis' topic, I researched four main thematic units, as follows:

- I. The artwork's place in the social-cultural space
- II. The transformation of the concept of space in art.
- III. The artwork appearing in public sites
- IV. The democratization of public art

In relations to the four main subjects of the dissertation I'm about to represent theoretical ideas that inspired me and how these transformed my interest in each theme. In this part of the Thesis I do not introduce my conclusions and way of thinking yet, only later in the sequel, when I'm outlining the structure.

In the first areas I approached a relatively wide historical context, focusing on the direct antecedents of the present conditions. The aim of this part is to bring out the relevant tendencies of the last hundred years of public art in a non-traditional way of art's historical approach, but primarily in the light of changing social functions.

(After announcing the subjects, I review the focus points thereof)

1. Definition of the concept of artistic autonomy, its significance and impacts.
2. The problem of artistic elitism. The transcendence of art, - i.e. the illusionistic independence from its social existence - The theme of the art becomes the art itself.
3. The effect of the New Yorker MoMA's concept regarding museums and collections to the Western-European and North-American public art sculptures. Apoliticism and faith in linearity and development of art history.

When researching the second area I focused on the increased interests in exhibition sites in the neo-avant-garde art movements.

1. The evolution of site-specific art

The third area of the analysis is centered around the phenomenon of the monument itself and the social and entertainment needs contributing to its emergence.

1. The partial rigidity and emptiness of the contemporary monuments and autonomous sculptural efforts. The ambitions for power hiding behind the respect and creation of current values. "Vandalism from above"<sup>1</sup>

The topic of the fourth area is the sensitive and democratic public art: the emergence of new genre public art and its spiritual roots.

1. The social change behind the emergence of new genre public art. The public art and the transformation of urban life, the radical expansion of urbanism. The transformation of urban structures; "From Frameworks to networks"<sup>2</sup>
2. The new approaches of public space: creation of a new image with cracking the city view's codes, new ways of interpretation, reflection or distortion.
3. The relationship between "high" and "popular" culture, their fading differences and their increasing interchangeability. The high culture as a frame, a pedestal, the culture of highlighting and the popular culture as the unlimited, undefined form of culture.<sup>3</sup> The public art as an experiment of communication to the wide population.
4. The new artistic strategies of the '90s. The ignorance of differences between transmission and reception, creation and interpretation. The fading myth of the originality in the creation. The artistic action as a tool, carrying aesthetic

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin H. D. Buchloh: Vandalismus from Above. Richard Serra's Tilted Arc in New York, in: Walter Grasskamp (edit.), *Unerwünschte Monumente*, München 1989.

<sup>2</sup> György Péter: *A hely szelleme. Magvető*, Bp. 2007. p.255.

<sup>3</sup> Bourriaud, Nicolas: *Utómunkálatok. Műcsarnok*, Bp. 2007. p.25.

possibilities in itself, aiming the generating and exploitation of cultural and other interactions amongst people.

## ***Structure***

For the sake of transparency I would like to briefly introduce hypotheses and methods I used for building this Thesis.

Following the header of the main units I placed some thought-provoking quotations in italics to call the attention to the concepts behind the themes, or in cases potential conflicts. I didn't separate the following text into chapters, only where the summary overview is replaced by a deeper analysis, focusing on sub-areas. They are typically located in the second half of the Thesis, which is focusing on public art. In each of these more specific details I tried to analyze one, sometimes more artworks, of course considering the theme of the chapter title. After utilizing the method of source criticism I searched for relevant thoughts and issues – even if from unrelated areas – which I interpreted and in specific cases developed further in order to build up the thesis. As much as my possibilities and knowledge enabled it, I opted for artworks and sources from Hungarian examples. I did so in my endeavor to further enhance the number of sources researching the phenomena of national public art. As of the artwork analyses I have written altogether three times about my own artworks and only in cases where the projects are adequate to the subject of the Thesis. I haven't done it for the sake of false or true modesty. The main reason for my decision is that the abundance of artwork descriptions would break the dynamics of the theoretical parts. However, in order to allow the reader to check my theoretical findings and the synch of the artworks created in my own praxis I made deeper descriptions about those artworks than in the cases of the ones created by another artist. (This procedure is also the logical consequence of the fact that those are mine.) Meantime, I must indicate (again, it's not out of modesty) that in the spirit of the earlier parts of the Thesis I chose the subjects of the analyses out of personal preference and especially, momentary interests. Therefore in my selections - and this is exponentially true for my own works – I did not aim for a complete overview or for quality aspects, but for the thematic harmony and the domesticity.

The Thesis consists of seven main parts, out of which four chapters after the introduction elaborate the four key phenomena that are in my opinion unavoidable in

terms of cultural and historical contexts of public art. (These chapters, beyond the other trains of thoughts, follow some kind of linear chronology corresponding with the history of public art.)

The first chapter dissects the changes in the position of the artists culminating in the beginning of the XXI. century. The basic assumptions on one hand are the fading contours of the artist's role, on the other hand the democratization of the creation process. As a main conclusion, the new artist's former researcher role is taken over by the image of a professional.

The second chapter is dealing with the physical location of the artwork, through which and through the role of the modern museum, the concept of modernity itself. In my hypothesis I'm trying to get beyond the modernity critique of public art, to show the connection points where the legacy is clearly demonstrated.

The third chapter's focus is on the issue of site-specificity, and through the neo-avant-garde origin of the term, the era itself. The crux of the hypothesis - like in the previous chapters - revolves around the theme pair, the actions of tradition and of innovation. In this chapter I have started a second hypothesis, which will be proven in detail in the following sections. (I mean the analysis of the differences between the public art of the '60s, '70s and the new genre public art.)

In Chapter Four I'm dealing with the general phenomenon of public art and the differences between the international and Hungarian uses of the term. I'm explaining the concepts used so far and analyze the semiotic properties thereof.

The fifth chapter is concentrating on the phenomenon of new genre public art, from the point of view of the areas I find the most adequate. My hypothesis is that the integrity of the genre is differentiated from the respective phenomena of the former era by two definitive points: the redefinition of the concept of space and from the emerging dialog with the receptor. At the following sub-sections I'm endeavoring to prove these claims with examples from various fields.

In the first sub-section of the chapter I'm examining the social science most relevant to the topic, which is the development of urban research from the '70s right up to the "up-to-date" theories. The second sub-section is devoted to the analysis of the characteristics of the above mentioned dialogical relationship. The third is all about the concept of originality and dematerialization, which's significance I am interpreting

through the current examples of the contemporary theory of art. In the fourth section I approach a theme again, which is beyond doubt one of the key concepts of the public art discourse. I'm trying to examine the hazards of temporality, and in the meantime share the hypothesis about temporality as a token of social commitment. In the fifth and sixth sub-sections I analyze the potential of the criticism of public art, citing the assumption that the genre is rather an artistic successor of the Civil Rights movement, than that of the public space sculpture. (The sixth sub-section is wordier than the sections before, due to the fact that I tried to briefly define the virtual and real-world context of public space through the phenomenon of hacktivism.)

At the end of the Thesis – taking after the introduction - there is a more self-reflected, personal part about the role this dissertation plays in my creative praxis.

### ***Conclusion***

The aim of this Thesis is to clearly define the process by the various artistic and scientific sources, which by tendency goes towards the public experience of artistic actions. It's destined to depict this change through the historical, and as part of it, idea-historical examination in an easily understandable manner.

The secondary goal is to introduce the most important changes in paradigms that occurred in the last hundred years of public art, and, without any didactic vision, to conclude from the mere historicity of the phenomena, which is beyond all stylistic trends.

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