

# WHY PUBLIC ART?

by Alexis Dahan

## **Public Art this, public art that... What does that even mean?**

I don't pretend to explain thoroughly what the term "public" means in a few minutes. I just want to share my point of view and the ones I have read. I will start with Hannah Arendt's definition from *The Human Condition*: "the term "public" signifies the world itself, in so far as it is common to all of us and distinguished from our privately owned place in it."

In essence, the "public space" is accessible to all and distinguished from the private space.

And in art's case it is distinguished from museums and galleries. So why do I do public interventions? Why the street?

## **INTRUSIONS: the freedom of the artist**

First and foremost because I can. You can do something in the public space without answering to anyone.

Making or doing something in the street is the result of your own decision as opposed to depending on the decision of a gallery or a curator. It is a way out of the catch 22: you need to show your work in order for someone to decide to show it. Nothing going on? You can just do something outside and it will be seen.

## **I call my public interventions Intrusions and I differentiate two kinds of intrusions: the ones that stand out and the ones that blend in.**

For example, in the spring of 2014, I walked around Soho in New York and dropped blue pigments into the water puddles that had formed on the pavement after a heavy night rain. (*Blue Puddles*, 2014) This was an intrusion that stood out for a pure aesthetic experience. When I use the word aesthetic I mean it by its ancient greek etymology where "aesthesis" meant perception.

Another example, in 2015 I placed a modified newsrack on Rivington street with a homemade newspaper full of philosophy texts. (*Newsrack*, 2015) This was an intrusion that blends in for spreading philosophical content because by essence, philosophy belongs to the public space and not necessarily to the university.

Finally, with *Intrusion* (cobblestone), 2015, I created an intrusion that blends in and is almost invisible. It only appears in the art space through its documentation.

## **There are limits to what can be done on your own:**

1. Scale (When I was up on a ladder three story high two weeks ago about to clamp a 60 feet heavy duty steel wire to the highline bridge on 27<sup>th</sup> street, I eventually realize how dangerous it actually was for the community, and damaging to the property of the Highline) You cannot exactly do whatever you want with the public space without authorization precisely because it also belongs to everyone else.

### **LARGER SCALE REQUIRE COLLABORATIONS**

2. Fragility of existence (I had to repaint *Alarm* (*Amann*), 2015 already 6 times since February)

To quote Thomas Hirschorn: "The works itself, the interventions, are not necessarily announced publically, especially if they are ephemeral, precarious and limited in time. It is an essential element on which I have reflected concerning interventions in the public space. Nothing that lasts. Nothing lasts."

3. In some ways, the artist takes the street hostage and forces everybody to see their work. Doing a public intervention that stands out somewhat makes the street corner your own. Look at my big intervention! There are ethical issues that may rise because of the violence of this kind of intrusion. Promoting the vanity of the artist gives the intervention a function and therefore takes the "Art" away because art should not be a mean for something else but rather an end in itself

## **COLLABORATION: attempt to obtain the authorization while remaining free**

While the public space is visible to all, it belongs to actual physical persons through the form of real estate owners or public service representatives. Different public administrations have decision power over the appearance of the city's property.

*Alarm (Amann)*, 2015, was made possible thanks to an authorization by the Fire Department of New York that took 4 months to obtain talking to dozens of different peoples from the Department of Transportation to FDNY.

*We serve selected texts*, 2013 was made possible thanks to the invitation of the DIA Art Foundation to place the installation in front of their 22<sup>nd</sup> street headquarters. Like *Newsrack* this piece was about disseminating philosophical content in the public space while being disguised as a standard New York City urban furniture (a hot dog cart).  
BECAUSE PHILOSOPHY WAS BORN IN AND BELONGS TO THE PUBLIC SPACE.

### **Limits to collaborative public art project:**

1. Over exposure to public artworks: Indeed the rising commonality of public art being what it is, such presence is accepted; we could even say that it is expected. The art environment somewhat gives it an inoffensive dull artistic meaning, a little bit like second hand smoke. Once identified as "public art", the public artwork loses the power to subvert its surroundings. When the question "what is it?" gets dumbly answered by "it's just art" all artistic value immediately disappears.
2. Become a mean to an end that is not artistic: serving the interests of the sponsors and promoting the vanity of the artist as opposed to the purity of an artistic experience. Between permits, insurance, materials and installation crews, the costs of putting public artwork up is so big that only "public art non-profits" and "corporate public art" approved projects can exist. Public Art Fund, Art Production Fund, Creative Time, etc. all have created viable models to promote public artworks in New York for a long time. However because costs make it impossible to young / non-celebrity artists to create larger scale public artworks, these institutions (and I'm not talking about the quality of the work here) use the public space as their own private museums while promoting their own curatorial statements and the sponsors that fund them. Whether you want it or not, you are forced to see what they have put up in your park or your street corner. In this case it's not the artist who takes the visual public space hostage, it's the art organization and the corporate sponsor. There is a risk that art becomes just an excuse to serve another purpose.
3. Institutional public art has different limits that are not addressed in this text and would require further analysis because institutional commissions with contemporary artists are originated from the entity that has authority over the public space as opposed to private initiatives concerning the public space. Today in European countries where art is traditionally a public affair (museums are funded by the state), potentially every monument, street, bridge, etc. is a destination for contemporary art. In this case the limits are more within the talent of the curators that are in charge rather than with the artists or the organization that supports them.

## **CONCLUSION**

Arendt again: "Only where things can be seen by many in a variety of aspects without changing their identity, so that those who are gathered around them know they see sameness in utter diversity, can worldly reality truly and reliably appear."

The function of Art in the public space is the creation of that "worldly reality" that Arendt speaks of. Public Art can be essential when it is not for sale and accessible to all. It can also be completely wrong when it is just a mean to an outside end, when vanity, corporate advertising or any other outside interests taints it.