

Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art.

Art in America

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Book Review by Eleanor Heartney

In the summer of 1993, Sculpture Chicago, a not-for-profit organization which had hitherto been associated with fairly conventional public art programming, unveiled the results of "Culture in Action." This ambitious series of public projects (the word sculpture was no longer applicable) aimed at a radical redefinition of the relationship between public artists and their audience. Each project entailed the immersion of artists in some urban community (defined loosely enough to include the members of a local union, the resident group of a public housing project, a group of high school students and a group of AIDS volunteers); the visible results ranged from a candy bar and a storefront hydroponic vegetable garden to a parade, a block party and a dinner party,

"Culture in Action" is evidence of a major shift that has taken place in the dialogue surrounding public art since the debacle of Tilted Arc. While efforts to merge art and life through community service have been in evidence since the '60s, only recently have they emerged as an institutionally supported alternative to what is being characterized as the unresponsive, irrelevant and overly artist-centered tradition of public art.

The history and philosophy of this "new genre public art" and the beginnings of a framework for criticism of it are set out in the two books under review here, both published by Bay Press in Seattle. Culture in Action is a report on Sculpture Chicago's project and contains essays by project curator Mary Jane Jacob as well as by Eva Olson, the project's director, and Michael Brenson. The second book, Mapping the Terrain. New Genre Public Art, grew out of a conference on public

art which was held at, the California College of Arts and Crafts in 1989. Edited by artist Suzanne Lacy, one of the participants in "Culture in Action," it includes essays by a variety of artists, writers and curators along with a very useful compendium of artists and art works from the last four decades which exemplify the ideas outlined in the text. Both books make the case for a new definition of public art that stresses community involvement, the elevation of process over product and a vision of art as an instrument for the encouragement of participatory democracy. Together they contain a great deal of provocative discussion about the social function of art as well as some inspiring examples of what can happen when artists seriously work for social change. However, both also reveal some very problematic assumptions beneath the rhetoric surrounding this kind of work.

In her introduction to Mapping the Terrain, Lacy notes that she intends to provide an alternative to the usual history of public art. Instead of focusing on Percent for Art projects and the NFA's Art in Public Places Program, she links the emergence of new genre public art to the thread that runs through Happenings, to '70s-style media interventions and activism, to feminist art and to the type of current work that focuses on identity politics and other political issues. She argues that a key factor in the new visibility of this more ephemeral, community-based work is the transition from a model of public art that stresses individual authorship to one that emphasizes collectivity and interaction with the audience. This theme is also taken up by other writers in the volume. Mary Jane Jacob asks, "But what if the audience for art ... were considered as the goal at the center of art production . . . as opposed to the modernist Western aim of self expression?" Suzi Gablik argues that new genre public art replaces modernism's depreciation of the Other with the cultivation of empathy and that it creates a place for the voices of members of groups previously excluded from the conventional art world.

Such attitudes indicate a troublesome aspect of *Mapping the Terrain*. While several essayists (most notably Patricia C. Phillips, Jeff Kelley, Lucy R. Lippard and Arlene Raven) maintain a critical point of view and thus seem able to measure the strengths and the weaknesses of "new genre public art," too many of the texts in this book are marked by a more or less uncritical demonization of modernism. The authors seem to subscribe to a cosmology in which modernism, associated with the ideas of autonomy, elitism, individualism, self-expression, reliance on institutional support and the consumption model of art, is seen as unequivocally bad; on the other hand, an approach identified with empathy, feeling, a feminine perspective, a devotion to the healing properties of art and the suppression of the artist's ego in the service of community empowerment is considered to be unequivocally good. Gablik is the worst offender, adhering as she does to a caricature version of modernism, which she blames for everything from the rape of the eco-system to the manipulation of the individual and the spiritual impoverishment of contemporary life.

The self-righteousness of this point of view seems to make those who endorse it oblivious to the contradictions and complexities of their positions. Jacob criticizes the museum as a vehicle for power and profit, but overlooks the implications of her own dependence on institutional funding for her highly ambitious public programs. Guillermo Gomez-Pena refers to the art world as a dysfunctional family and Judy Baca decries the cult of the individual, but both ignore the less-than-progressive forces that may be unleashed when communal will is allowed to overwhelm the individual voice. (There is a strange and unexamined parallel between this championing of the community and the ideas currently espoused by conservative populists, with their emphasis on community standards and their advocacy of politics on the local level.) Only Phillips seems willing to grant validity to the individual, noting

that vital public life involves the acceptance of individual difference rather than its suppression.

Equally troubling is the appearance in some of these essays of a strain of nostalgia for pre-urban or rural models of communal society. Baca and Lippard both invoke the earth-centered practices of native peoples, while Estella Conwill Majozo conjures up the African view of intrinsic connectedness. But are such models really relevant to the modern urban culture in which most of this art is situated?

Culture in Action offers an opportunity to put the theories articulated in *Mapping the Terrain* to the test. The two theoretical essays in the book pick up many of the same issues. Michael Brenson admirably denounces modernism-bashing, struggling instead to find a basis for "community based art" (as it is referred to here) in the modernist tradition. In the process he makes some questionable assumptions--e.g., that modernism is about healing the shocks of modern life, that paintings are emblems of power--but his efforts to link community-based art to the work of modernist figures like the Russian Constructivists, Joseph Beuys and Gordon Matta-Clark give it a context which is sorely missing from the other book.

Jacob's essay recapitulates public art's move away from the restraints of institutional dependence. She maintains that art's defection from the museum and its return to its communal origins spells a new era of freedom for artists and their audience. Yet the descriptions of the projects which follow, and which make up the bulk of this book, undermine this argument. The *Culture in Action* program consisted of eight projects created by artists or artist groups commissioned to create community-based works. While no museum was involved in this undertaking, it is hard to see how a program with an obviously very generous budget supplied by the NEA and the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund could be characterized as institution-free.

Predictably, the projects described in this report vary in effectiveness. The two most successful ones have also proved to have a continuing life: Inigo Manglano-Ovalle's video workshop for West Town area gang members, which culminated in a day-long block party and which seems to have been a genuine community celebration, and HaHa's hydroponic garden, which generated a network of AIDS volunteers and involved artists who lived in the community in which they worked.

Other projects were marred by an arbitrariness of concept or by the limitations of art's reach into other spheres of life. Suzanne Lacy's celebration of women's contribution to Chicago's history and present-day life in the form of 100 boulders, each inscribed with a woman's name, came close to the old commemorative model of public art, while her dinner party at Hull House for 14 internationally acclaimed women smacked of the kind of elitism that new genre public art supposedly repudiates. Mark Dion worked with students from two area high schools on an urban ecology workshop that included a trip to study wildlife preservation in Belize. While the 12 participants were clearly offered a remarkable experience, it is hard to see any other lessons this project provided beyond what might be possible with an unlimited education budget.

The two most problematic projects were Kate Ericson and Mel Ziegler's educational paint chart, created in collaboration with the resident group of a public housing development, and "We Got It," a worker-designed candy bar created by Christopher Sperandio and Simon Grennan with the members of a local bakery, confectionery and tobacco workers' union. Both these projects were undertaken as a means of empowering the community collaborators, but ran into roadblocks which ultimately seemed to do little more than confirm the powerlessness of the participants.

Taken together, the projects suggest that community-based art functions best when artists have a genuine and ongoing commitment to the community, when the concept has a natural connection to the social problems addressed, and when the artist has done enough homework to really understand the underlying issues the community confronts.

Yet despite--or perhaps because of--their flaws, Culture in Action and Mapping the Terrain should serve as valuable resources for those artists, administrators and observers who are interested in following new developments in public art. They provide enough examples of effective community art to suggest that this approach has considerable potential if it is not hijacked by New Age sophistries or unexamined populism. In her essay in Mapping the Terrain, Patricia Phillips asks, "Can art change consciousness and affect actions? Can artists excite such persuasive--and enduring--dynamics in public life and local communities? Or is this another crazed, slightly megalomaniacal notion of the artist's influence and role in contemporary culture?" These are questions that need to be posed every time artists venture out of the studio into the uncertain world of community-based art.

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