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Angela Barbanente The social function of territory and of town planning: demands, projects, and problems

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Problems, policies, and research

Urban policy in Brazil: national strategies and local practices

Institutional innovations and social-spatial differences

Lula's government and the Ministry of Cities

The City Statute: new avenues for urban management

Curitiba: the challenge of the sustainable city

Three questions to Jaime Lerner

The Metropolitan Region of Curitiba

Brazilian cities between modernization and marginality

Preserving historic centres in Brazil: ideas and practices

Alberto Magnaghi

Projects and implementation

Exercises in statutory and participatory planning: the Prato TCP

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Lorenza Perelli

Gian Carlo Calza

Alain Guez

Profiles and practices

The city of time and the culture of planning

The spillovers from urban time policies

Women's views of the transformation of the city. A research workshop

The city of the night

Festen. A memorandum for the workshop *Architecture of festivity*

The places of mobility, or the design of temporality inhabited public spaces

Events, museums and paths for urban renewal

Art transforms public spaces

Les Halles. A time architecture workshop

Time aspects in the design of Les Halles in Paris

Mario Sechi

Methods and tools

City centres and peripheries in Pier Paolo Pasolini and Paolo Volponi

Pierluigi Properzi

The reformist governance of the territory. The need for a project

Giovanni Circella, Mario Binetti,

Margherita Mascia

The Prospect Theory and the prediction of traveler behaviour

Received books

Art transforms public spaces

Lorenza Perelli

The question of the specificity of public art can be posed as a question of what makes an artwork suitable for a public space. As Mary Jane Jacob, who organised exhibitions which formed a model for public art in the 1990's asks: "is public a quality that depends on the place, on ownership or on access?" (Jacob 1995, p. 55). The question has been relevant since the late 1970's as a question concerning the legitimacy, use and effectiveness of public art, above all in Great Britain and the United States. The United States programme *Art in the Public Place* of the National Endowment for the Arts started in 1967 with the objective of "giving public access to the best art of our time outside museums" (Finkelpearl 2001, p. 22). It is precisely this "official movement of public art oriented towards monuments which lasted unchallenged until the 1970's" (Finkelpearl 2001, p. 22) that is questioned. Given the objective of "giving public access to the best art of our time outside museums", what conclusions can be drawn today if "most of the modern sculptures located in public places met with the public indifference?" (Lowell 1998, p. 17). Indifference or even rejection by the public of many contemporary sculptures located in public places poses the problem of how public art can reconnect with spectators and places. This critical work opened up the possibility of a new model of action. What makes a public art work, a specific work for a public space? Or better what links a work, not to any type of space but specifically to a public space? What are the elements that make a space

public? And how does a work relate to them? The space in which a work is located seems finally to be put into question. Public art today is committed to acting for the transformation of the spaces in which it intervenes, whether they are urban or museum spaces, treating them as site specific working contexts, as (artistic) research on the place. The term *site specific* (Know 2002) comes from artistic research that started with minimal art and land art around the end of the 1970's.

A definition of contextual art was formulated by the critic Rosalind Deutsche.

"Contextual art is a term which initially indicated a work of art which incorporates the exhibition context - the museum, the gallery, the urban space - in the work itself... In order to demonstrate that, for example, the aesthetic perception and the reception of the work is not disconnected from, but contingent on the circumstances in which the work is seen, the artist creates works specifically designed for the place and physically inseparable from it. In this manner site specific art demonstrates that art does not have an independent meaning that remains intact when the circumstances of space or time change. The meaning of art is formed in relation to its framing conditions and, as a consequence, it changes with the spaces that it occupies and with the position of the people who observe it" (Deutsche 1998, p. 237).

One initial character of site specific art is that the space is not chosen intentionally by citizens to enjoy that work there, but is simply accessible to all and passed through without looking. The artist at times acts by bringing critical elements, intervenes by means of the work on that distracted

perception to focus it instead on other contents, with a communication technique that might at times be very aggressive. This is the case of Maurizio Cattelan for Milan. 350 pages of press reviews documented the liveliness of the rumpus his work caused because of the protests of citizens, offended by the presence (in public, that is) of three mannequins of children, hanging by their necks with their eyes open under the oldest tree in the city, in piazza XXIV Maggio and removed by a citizen after just 48 hours. This work places us at the centre of site specific questions also as the capacity of a work to act critically towards the ways in which we inhabit places.

What then are the places that artists name as public in the sense of public art? Artistic research in the late 1990's places the public factor in the public (user). It is a fundamental shift for artistic research, which sees works as 'not commissioned', but originating on the place in co-operation with the public. This artistic approach underlines how it is by triggering public participation that the work acts consistently with the specificity of the public space. It is a theme on which art reflected in the 1990's, interpreted also as a process in which the artist decentralises the creative location towards others. The Oreste group is an example of this. It is a collective nickname used by each participant of a project which has worked on inter-subjective forms of communication, broadening them with the practice of reticular connection, as a work which not only amplifies the legitimate space of art in broadening its action, but also that of persons with which it constructs a patrimony of shared knowledge. The practice of art acts here by creating a social space by

means of a common order of participants in a collective project. If you observe these practices, the significant dichotomy is no longer between public space and exhibition space but in that gap between artists and non artists which Oreste tries to close. When these practices are represented inside traditional exhibition spaces, as in the case of the Oreste dinners or meetings held in the spaces of the Venice Biennial, they transform the exhibition spaces themselves which are confused with other ordinary meeting places.

The work of Cattelan and the Oreste experiences transform the public places in which they intervene in two different ways. Oreste does it by transforming exhibition spaces into ordinary places; Cattelan does it by acting on the circumstances of the formation of public opinion. The work holds together the environmental circumstances in which it appears. It is the aspect of 'co-habitation' that the critic Nicolaus Bourriaud has called the "relational" capacity of art, between place, circumstances and persons that takes on objective form in a work while it lasts.

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