Does Public Art Have to Be Bad Art?

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The Public-Art Publics: An Analysis of Some Structural Differences among Public-Art Spheres

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Abstract: In this paper, I argue for what I define as the *multiplicity thesis* (MT). According to MT, there is not a single public of public art, but a multiplicity of them. I defend MT both as a descriptive and a normative claim. I explore different types of publics of public art that can be distinguished from one another in terms of their different sizes. I expand my analysis of the differences among separate publics of public art by considering temporary and enduring ones.

Keywords: aesthetics; philosophy; art in the public sphere; public art; dialogic art; public sphere; public engagement; temporary art; durational approaches to public art; Habermas

1 Introduction

There is wide consensus that a constitutive link exists between a public artwork and its public. Many believes that the identity of a public artwork as a *public* artwork, in effect, significantly depends upon such a link. Public art's primary concern as an artistic practice, one could very well say, is not the material constitution of a particular kind of artifacts, but rather the creation of a social network connecting diverse individuals.

Thanks to its special relationship with its public, public art has the unique potential to encourage a peculiar modality of discourse where individuals share and debate their perspectives on a variety of issues they care about. Many have suggested that such a modality of discourse can be effectively captured in terms of the habermasian notion of the public sphere.[1] By drawing on Habermas' view, one can characterize the public sphere as the discursive space constituted by private individuals discussing rationally (or perhaps *reasonably*) issues of public relevance.[2]

I believe that the account sketched above is generally correct. However, it suffers from an important ambiguity. In a first sense, which I define as *the unity thesis* (UT), one could interpret it as saying that public art addresses and relates to a single and united public, that is, "*the* public-art public," whose members exchange views in a one single public sphere, "*the* public-art sphere."[3] In a second sense, one could interpret it as expressing what I define as *the multiplicity thesis* (MT): different public artworks address and relate to a series of somewhat separate publics. In this case, we do not have a single public-art public, but

1 See, for instance, North, "The Public as Sculpture."

2 Habermas' conception of rationality seems too narrow for capturing the logic of public discourse. See Gardiner, "Wild Publics and Grotesque Symposiums."

3 Here I follow Habermas when he defines the public sphere as "made up of private people gathered together as *a* public." [Emphasis Added] See Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 276. In this sense, I assume that a public corresponds to a public sphere.

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several—that is, a multiplicity of—public-art publics in the plural. And members of those publics exchange views within a multiplicity of public-art spheres.

By following an important strand in public art scholarship, it is my view that MT should be preferred over UT.[4] In this paper, I show with argument why this is the case. I argue that MT can function both as an analytical tool that can effectively help us capture current practices of public art, and as a normative ideal, which can help us maximize public artworks' possibility at the level of public engagement. Section 2 shows why MT is preferable over UT both as an analytical tool and as a normative ideal. Sections 3-7 provides further evidence in favor of MT by examining a series of case-studies, while introducing a series of fine-tuned theoretical distinctions.

2 The multiplicity of public-art publics

A first reason to prefer MT over UT is what I call its "descriptive fitness," that is, its capacity of describing effectively actual practices of public art. In effect, MT seems to capture descriptively—whereas UT does not—an actual extensional discontinuity between different public-art publics, a discontinuity that can be empirically observed. If the public-art public were a single public, we should legitimately expect at least a reasonable number of members showing interest in several public artworks. However, most individuals actively participating in the ongoing public debate on a specific public artwork do not play any role in debates related to other public artworks.

For instance, Martha Louis—the widow of famous African American boxing heavyweight champion Joe Louis—actively participated in the discussion on Robert Graham's *Monument to Joe Louis* (1986).[5] However, it seems that she only discussed Graham's work. Though impressively active in the discussion on Pino Castagna's *In pietra alpestra e dura* ("In Alpine and Hard Rock," 2009), Italian Congressman Fabio Evangelisti never participated in discussions of other public artworks.[6] Examples could be listed *ad libitum*. In this sense, MT seems to accord descriptively with actual practices of public art. Empirically, one might say, there seems to be a multiplicity of public-art publics.

Second (and perhaps more importantly), MT is very much compatible—and UT is not—with a widely endorsed normative ideal guiding artists in creating their public art projects. The foundation of such normative ideal can be found in the view of public art administrator Jerry Allen. In his article "How Art Becomes Public," Allen presents a series of points intended as possibly guiding our practices of public art toward a more consistent public success. Among other things, he argues that the presentation of an artwork has better chances to engage as a public-art public a set of individuals when "speaking to them" of things they do care about and in a language that they do understand.[7]

But since our societies are pluralistic and diverse, it seems overtly ambitious to believe that such artistic "communication" can obtain between a public artwork and a universal public-art public of which *everyone* is a member, as UT suggests—or that such "communication" is the only one to aspire to.[8] By accepting the limitations of artistic communication in pluralistic societies, Allen argues that artists should produce public artworks with a more modest, but more reachable, goal in mind: to aim at engaging as their respective public-art publics specific sets of individuals, that is, as Allen puts it, "*to create a new public for each work*."[9] Contemporary practices of public art—and especially those associated with "new genre public art"—look at Allen's early view with sympathy.[10]

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4 See, among others, Allen, "How Art Becomes Public"; Mikulay, "Another Look at the Grand Vitesse"; Meehan, "Needs No Introduction."

5 See Graves, "Representing the Race", 222.

6 See, for instance, Evangelisti, "Camera con vista."

7 Allen, "How Art Becomes Public", 249.

8 Ibid., 250.

9 Allen, "How Art Becomes Public", 250. [Original emphasis.] This does not exclude that many public-art publics can engage the same work. However, this possibility would require further discussion that I do not provide here.

10 For an updated review of the literature on "new genre" or "dialogic art," see Calo, "From Theory to Practice."

By reacting against more traditional approaches to public art as epitomized exemplarily by Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* (and his dismissive attitude towards the viewers), artists, curators, critics, and theorists associated with new genre public art have been advocating for a form of public art that, on the contrary, "cares about, challenges, involves, and consults [the public] for or with whom it is made, respecting community and environment."[11] In this sense, new genre public art is "based on engagement," that is, its essence lies in the "relationship" that obtains between an artwork and its public-art public.[12]

If the relationship between an artwork and its public-art public is the essence of public art, then—as art critic Patricia Phillips argues—public artists' primary aim "is not to create permanent objects for presentation in traditionally accepted public places but, instead, to assist in the construction of a public—to encourage, through actions, ideas, and interventions, a participatory [public] where none seemed to exist."[13] But such a construction must recognize those practical limitations that Allen underlines.

Artistic communication is at peril whenever one wants to address an unspecified and "universal" public. It is only by examining "the changing conditions and uncertain destinies of [selected] local communities and cities," and by making those matter in one's work, that a public artist can hope to be successful.[14] In this sense, we should understand a public-art public as that set of individuals addressed by a public artwork. It must be emphasized that, in this respect, my view is distinctly sympathetic to Michael Warner's theory of publics when he argues that a public "exists *by virtue of being addressed*."[15] There is a multiplicity of public-art publics not only at an empirical level. Public-art publics are many also because, normatively, we want to construe them as being plural.

Of course, different public-art publics do not identify perfectly separated and self-sufficient sets of individuals. Moreover, public-art spheres should not be considered as isolated discursive spaces. As the pieces of a scattered collage, public-art publics and spheres are (at least potentially) overlapping, contiguous, and interconnected phenomena. They surely constitute a network. However, their individual peculiarities seem to separate different public-art publics and spheres in ways that no unifying trend can ultimately overcome.[16]

In this sense, UT lacks the necessary conceptual resources needed to capture effectively the significant differences characterizing distinct and faraway public-art publics—a point that is fundamental for developing a successful public artwork. The lifestyle, customs, traditions, heritage, habits, values, and interests can vary so dramatically across different public-art publics that any notion of a universal public-art public becomes either demonstrably false or, since too abstract, useless for purposes of public engagement.

It must be emphasized that artists do *not* construct their targeted public-art publics in a single and consistent way. On the contrary, when looking at contemporary examples of public art, we must acknowledge that artists endorse a plurality of approaches in identifying the public-art publics they want to address. In particular, I suggest that we introduce the two following different kinds of ways of identifying public-art publics. A first way, which I adapt from John Keane's account of the public sphere, identifies different categories of public-art publics in terms of their sizes.[17]

In effect, some artists, like Suzanne Lacy in *Full Circle* (1993), identify public-art publics with sets of individuals of limited extension, that is, with a particular urban or suburban population. Others, like Maya Lin in *Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall* (1982), understand their public-art publics as larger sets comprising the individuals constituting a national population. Finally, as in the case of Christo and Jeanne-Claude's *The Umbrellas: Joint Project for Japan and U.S.A* (1984-91), there are artists who, by targeting individuals from different countries, aim at constructing public-art publics of a very large size.

A second way of identifying public-art publics relates to an important debate that has been characterizing the studies of public art in the last few decades. Such debate has been examining the temporal dimension of

11 Lippard, "Looking Around", 121.
12 See Lacy, "Introduction", 19-20.
13 Phillips, "Public Constructions", 67.
14 Ibid., 64.
15 Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics", 50.
16 For a sympathetic view of public spheres, see Keane, "Structural Transformations of the Public Sphere."
17 Keane, "Structural Transformations of the Public Sphere", 9-16.

public artworks. By drawing on those reflections, I distinguish between temporary and enduring approaches to the construction of public-art publics. That is, I want to discuss comparatively the view of those who aim at constructing *temporary* public-art publics, and the view of those who, on the contrary, conceive public-art publics as *enduring*.[18]

In section 3, 4, and 5, I examine the first distinction. In section 6 and 7, I discuss the second one. By developing explicitly those distinctions, I have a double aim. First, I want to gather evidence in favor of MT by providing the reader with a significant sample of how differently public-art publics can be construed (and how those differences can influence strategies of public engagement).[19] Second, I aim at developing an ideal-typical analysis of different kinds of public-art publics and spheres. I believe that the development of those ideal-types can both inform pertinently our understanding of public art and help guide our practices.

3 Local public-art publics

Lacy' *Full Circle* was one of the eight projects included in "Culture in Action," a temporary exhibition program conceived and directed by independent curator Mary Jane Jacob. The work consisted of one hundred half-ton limestone rocks that suddenly appeared on the sidewalks of downtown Chicago. Each one of those rocks was carrying a plate, where engraved one could read the name of a woman native of Chicago and her contribution to the city's public life. Through her work, Lacy intention was not only to signal the remarkable contributions to the city's public life of great women. Lacy was denouncing Chicago's lack of recognition of such contributions, as testified to by the absence in the urban area of a major monument dedicated to anyone of those women. She gave to the city one hundred of those monuments. *Full Circle* ended on September 30, 1993, with a significant act. Fourteen notable women had dinner at Addam's Hull House, where the role of women in a changing society was the main topic of discussion.[20]

In *Full Circle*, Lacy was targeting the Chicago residents as her public-art public.[21] Thanks to the relatively limited size of such a set of individuals and their geographical concentration, the reception of *Full Circle* was facilitated by a series of small scale, face-to-face interactions among viewers, which were triggered thanks to the encounter with a set of unexpected objects occupying familiar spaces.[22] Also, Lacy was seeking public engagement by granting to members of her targeted public-art public the possibility to participate in creating the artwork. In particular, "several committees of women were established by the artist and Sculpture Chicago to oversee the nominating and selecting of one hundred local women who would eventually receive a boulder commemoration."[23] Also, *Full Circle* involved the participation of fourteen women in the conclusive act of the project. It must be emphasized that Lacy's intended strategy of public engagement included addressing in *Full Circle* social concerns relating explicitly to the daily lives of Chicago residents. As we have seen, in that work, she addressed the issue of women's contributions to the city's social history. Her position was explicitly critical of those political and social forces that obscured such significant contributions. *Full Circle*'s aim—one might say—was to change the *status quo*, and to grant public recognition to those contributions. In this sense, *Full Circle* can be characterized as a form of political activism.

At this point, we can characterize Lacy's *Full Circle* and similarly conceived public artworks in the following way. Projects like *Full Circle*—call them "local projects"—identify their respective public-art

18 One should emphasize that Western theories of the arts largely overlook the role of time, and cannot accommodate its significance for what pertains artistic appreciation. In making room for temporal considerations, my theory challenges the canon of Western art theory.

19 Of course, the sample is not meant to exhaust the possibilities of construing public-art publics.

20 See http://www.suzannelacy.com/early-works/#/full-circle/ (accessed 31 Oct. 2018).

21 See Kwon, *One Place After Another*, 118.

22 Lucy Lippard proposes the most systematic discussion of face-to-face interactions' relevance in public art. See Lippard, *The Lure of the Local*.

23 Kwon, *One Place After Another*, 118.

publics, in terms of what I define as the *local criterion*: individuals living, working, operating, etc., within a urban (or suburban) space where an artwork is (intended to be) presented constitute its distinctive public-art public. Let's call those public-art publics individuated in terms of the local criterion as *local public-art publics*.[24] Local public-art publics include as their members from few dozens to hundreds of thousands of individuals. In the case of some metropolises, the members of a local public-art public can be millions.

Strategies of public engagement at a local level generally rely on the possibility of face-to-face, small scale interactions between members of local public-art publics. In order to facilitate their participation, local projects guarantee to those members an active role in creating the artworks. Besides actively involving members in the creative process, it must be emphasized that local projects seek public engagement also by addressing directly issues that are of interests for the members of their targeted public-art publics. In effect, those projects address—in a politically active way—issues related to the living conditions of their targeted public-art publics.

I call *local public-art spheres* those spaces within which members of local public-art publics discuss. As a consequence of the nature of local projects, within those spheres individuals discuss rationally (or, more correctly, reasonably) issues of local interest. Here, discussions have an important oral component. However, they are also facilitated, reported, and expanded through the use of local mass media and social media. Through those discussions, members of local public-art publics are able to thematize disagreements about daily issues, while seeking for democratic solutions. As part of the democratic processes concerned with examining local issues, the discussions carried out within local public-art spheres are also fundamental for construing local identities.

4 National public-art publics

Maya Lin's *Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall* (VVMW) (1982) is one of the most famous monuments of the 20th century. Its design is minimalist, though deeply evoking. It consists of a 220 foot-long wall. The wall, shaped as a 'V', is carved on the ground. Its depth increases progressively towards the vertex, which is 10 feet below ground level. The surface of the wall is covered by a series of highly reflective panels in polished black granite from Bangalore, India. Engraved on those stones, one can read the names of the almost 60,000 soldiers (women and men) who lost their lives during the Vietnam War.

Lin conceived her VVMW as aiming at engaging as (potential) members of its public-art public all of the American people. In effect, her intention was to create a project "that everyone [in the nation] would be able to respond to."[25] In order to engage such a large and heterogeneous public-art public, Lin opted for an abstract design, whose openness of meaning and interpretation was intended as a way to maximize inclusiveness. By avoiding representationality, Lin believed (correctly, as the test of time seems to show) that she could engage a variety of individuals with different ideas about what the Vietnam War was. "A realistic sculpture," Lin writes, "would be only one interpretation of that time."[26] Her seeking for inclusiveness also translated into adopting what has been usually defined as an "apolitical approach." In this sense, in her VVMW, Lin refused the political activism typical of local projects. She addressed the national issue of the traumatic post-war condition with a "conciliatory" attitude, by favoring a design that could *not* be interpreted as making a statement about the significance of the war and its deaths.

As predicted by Carole Blair, Marsha Jeppeson, and Enrico Pucci Jr., VVMW has built the foundations for a new trajectory in public memorializing.[27] Since its inauguration, many national monuments have been designed and realized by following the trajectory engendered by Lin's VVMW.[28] We can characterize those

24 As recent scholarship in historiography argues, a criterion individuating publics in spatial terms tends to be maximally inclusive. See, Rospocher, "Beyond the Public Sphere," 23-24.

25 Lin, "Making the Memorial."

26 Ibid.

27 See Blair, Jeppeson, and Pucci, "Public Memorializing in Postmodernity."

28 Besides the series of replicas of Lin's VVMW, we can list among those other monuments Lin's *Civil Rights Memorial* (1988–89), and Michael Arad and Peter Walker's *National September 11 Memorial* (2011).

public artworks—call them "national projects"—as follows. Projects like VVMW identify their respective public-art publics in terms of what I define as the *national criterion*: individuals occupying a national space where an artwork is (intended to be) presented constitute its distinctive public-art public. I call those public-art publics individuated in terms of the national criterion as *national public-art publics*. National public-art publics include several millions of members interacting within a nation-state framework.

In terms of strategies of public engagement, national projects differ in a significant way from local projects. They seek public engagement by addressing issues of national relevance, such as memorializing important historical events or celebrating national values. It must be emphasized that national projects abstain from political activism. In effect, they are more "conciliatory" in spirit. In this sense, rather than providing a "statement" about the *status quo*, they aim at providing a space where individuals can reflect on the significant histories and identities characterizing their countries.

It seems to me that the predominance of mediated communication over face-to-face, small scale interactions is what justifies the choice of engaging national public-art publics in a more "conciliatory" and less politically active way. Mediated communication can easily lead to escalating altercations. As the extensive literature on the "contact hypothesis" convincingly argues, individuals engaging in mediated exchanges are—whereas those involved in face-to-face conversations are not—more inclined to embrace prejudices and biases, thus evaluating others' opinions not according to reason. On the contrary, when discussing face-to-face, individuals are more likely to treat others as equals.[29] In this sense, I believe that a more politically active profile would make a national project a potential source of unproductive altercations generated by misunderstanding.

I call *national public-art spheres* those spaces within which members of national public-art publics discuss. As I have already mentioned, within those spheres, individuals discuss rationally (or, more correctly, reasonably) issues of national interest. It must be emphasized that, although oral communication is not absent, it is not at the core of interactions between members of national pubic-art spheres. Large-circulation newspapers, national TV and radio channels (such as *The New York Times*, RAI Italian National Channels, and BCC radio) are the usual means of communication.[30] By thematizing issues of national import, those discussions concur to the construction of national identities.

5 International public-art publics

The Umbrellas: Joint Project for Japan and U.S.A. (1984-91) is one of the most ambitious projects by Christo and Jeanne-Claude. Firstly conceived in 1984, it took almost 7 years (mostly dedicated to patient negotiations for obtaining permits), the collaboration of circa 2,000 persons, and an overall budget of $26 million (entirely provided by the artists) to complete. *The Umbrellas* consisted of 3,100 oversized fabric aluminum and steel umbrellas, standing almost 20 feet high, 30 feet wide when opened, and weighting 440 pounds each. Of those 3,100 umbrellas, 1760 were yellow. The remainders were blue. The yellow ones have been installed on the hillsides at Tejon Pass along Interstate 5 northwest of Los Angeles, and they have been arranged along an 18 mile path. Christo and Jeanne-Claude decided to place the blue umbrellas thousands of miles away, in a Japanese valley located 70 miles north of Tokyo, in the Ibaraki Prefecture. There, the umbrellas occupied a stretch of 12 miles. Colors were chosen for their resemblance with the natural tones characterizing the two selected locations: yellow to resemble the sun-dried hills of Southern California, and blue to look like the damp, verdant valleys of Japan.

Christo and Jeanne-Claude designed *The Umbrellas* as a public artwork whose public-art public included individuals in the U.S. and Japan at the time. For that reason, this artwork occupies a special place in the history of both public art and art in general. Christo proudly affirmed (perhaps exaggerating a bit) the *The Umbrellas* was the first artwork designed to be experienced in two places in the world at the same

29 The first systematic formulation of the contact hypothesis can be found in G. W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice*.

30 For instance, the early controversy on VVMW took place mostly within mass media, in particular within newspapers.

time.[31] The difficulties of engaging such a heterogeneous and vast multitude of individuals as public-art public required an elaborate strategy from the artists. First, they were very careful in selecting locations that were easily accessible. In California, they opted for a strip of land in the proximity of a highway. When considering the Japanese site, they decided that it should be close to a major international airport.[32]

Second, they requested the collaboration of locals in completing the project. Many were hired to provide the necessary "manual force" for actually installing and opening the umbrellas. Others were used as supervisors, whose duty was to check on the viewers' behavior around the umbrellas. Third, in designing *The Umbrellas,* Christo and Jeanne-Claude opted for a "friendly" artistic code, which employed familiar forms in the attempt to attract a heterogeneous set of individuals who were not necessarily informed about recent developments in contemporary art.[33] The artists' "welcoming gesture" included leaving the interpretation of *The Umbrellas*' meaning(s) very much open: as Christo and Jeanne-Claude said, viewers can interpret *The Umbrellas* in many different ways, and "[a]ll interpretations are valid."[34] Finally, a sapient use of various types of international media surely helped the public success of Christo and Jeanne-Claude's international project.

By considering *The Umbrellas* (and possibly similar public artworks), we can identify a third kind of public art project, which I call "international projects." International projects aim at engaging public-art publics that are individuated in terms of the following *international criterion*: individuals occupying the international spaces where an artwork is (intended to be) presented constitute its distinctive public-art public. I define as *international public-art publics* those public-art publics that are consistent with the above criterion. Public-art publics of that kind include from millions to perhaps even billions of members interacting at a supranational level.

At an international level, we notice that strategies of public engagement include an attentiveness to the location(s) of presentation, which are selected considering their accessibility. Also, the patient collaboration with locals, who can play a fundamental role in completing an artwork, is important for achieving public success. In this kind of projects, the use of familiar artistic codes facilitate the interaction between viewers—even those who are not familiar with the latest stylistic trajectories in contemporary art—and the work. The familiarity of the artistic code can also be enhanced by a welcoming gesture towards viewers' diverging interpretations. Finally, considering the magnitude of international public-art publics, a methodical use of mass media is fundamental for promoting the reception of the work.

Let's call *international public-art spheres* those spaces within which members of international public-art publics discuss issues related to international projects. Discussions within those spheres are made available by global communications firms (such as News Corporation International, Reuters), TV channels reporting international events, major newspapers, and the Internet. Within international public-art spheres, members of international public-art publics are exposed to issues and points of views that stretch beyond those discussed and presented within the habitual boundaries of smaller scale public-art spheres. In this sense, discussions within international public-art spheres have as their main focus the comparison between different ways of living. By thematizing those differences, they could very well challenge the national identities of those individuals participating in debates.

6 Temporary public-art publics

By considering contemporary practices of public art, the multiplicity of public-art publics is not only testified by the different (types of) public-art publics that can be distinguished in terms of their size. A second distinction provides further evidence in favor of MT. Such distinction discriminates among public-art publics in terms of their temporal dimension. In the last few decades, the temporal dimension of public

31 Weisman, "Christo's Intercontinental Umbrella Project."
32 Ibid.
33 Cher Knight discusses at large the possibilities of "populistic" choices in public art. See, in particular, Knight, *Public Art*, 65.
34 Mantegna, Christo and Jeanne-Claude, "Interview."

artworks has been the object of a lively debate among scholars.[35] In particular, by considering the most recent trends in contemporary public art, some theorists have underlined the need to challenge—or, at least, reorient and enrich—the traditional view that sees public artworks as lasting installations aiming at engaging *permanently* their respective public-art publics. In effect, as Cher Knight correctly suggests, it is common among artists and art administrators to believe that achieving success depends on being able to install a permanent work. And, we must admit, the idea that permanence is intrinsically positive has an intuitive appeal: if an artwork is made to last, one is drawn to think, it must possess something that is worth preserving.[36]

However, as Garry Apgar argues, artists' desire to create something permanent is potentially problematic. In effect, artists involved in longer-term projects usually try to translate into reality such a desire by opting for very unspecific strategies of public engagement, often aiming at capturing the attention of a "timeless" and "universal" public.[37] But we have already seen how problematic such strategies are in terms of public success: their "generality" puts at risk the very possibility of a successful artistic communication. In this sense, Adam Gopnik emphasizes that, because of their lack of specificity, traditional "permanent public artworks"—such as the many statues of heroes on horses that populate the parks of virtually every city in the Western world—often fail to engage their public-art publics. In effect, those artworks seem to easily disappear into their surroundings, as an "amiable bronze Pop art" invisible to our eyes and minds.[38] Moreover, as Knight adds, permanent artworks are "prone to play things too safely," in the attempt to avoid controversy now and in the future.[39] As a consequence, they tend to be uninteresting: too "cautious" for generating a widespread public response.

In suggesting a way to overcome some of the limitations of permanent forms of public art, some theorists argue in favor of a practice supporting the creation of *temporary* public art projects.[40] "Public art," Phillips writes, "requires a more passionate commitment to the temporary—to the information culled from the short-lived project."[41] Thanks to their fleeting nature, Phillips adds, temporary public artworks offer great opportunities for experimenting with "new ideas, new forms, new methods of production."[42] Also, the awareness of their imminent "fate" encourages artists involved in temporary projects to focus on the *hic et nunc* ("here and now"), that is, to address important and (perhaps) difficult issues that characterize the current lives of those selected as members of their respective public-art publics. In this sense, the temporariness of this kind of projects facilitates more specific strategies of public engagement—strategies that are distinctively developed to address specific sets of individuals as public-art publics. That same awareness of an artwork's imminent disappearing also stimulates the curiosity in viewers, whose attention is easily directed towards a temporary project as a consequence of its "fleeting" nature.[43] As Knight observes, "temporary works can deftly grab and maintain the public's attention with their 'Hurry, hurry, see them now before they disappear!' urgency."[44]

It must be emphasized that theorists arguing for promoting temporary public artworks do not intend their proposal "as indictment of or indifference to permanent public art, but rather as an endorsement of alternatives."[45] Temporary public artworks have surely some advantages when compared to permanent ones in terms of a capacity to engage successfully public-art publics. However, as I argue in the following

35 See, among others, Phillips, "Temporality and Public Art."
36 Knight, *Public Art*, 97.
37 Apgar, "Redrawing the Boundaries of Public Art," 24.
38 Gopnik, "Introduction", 9. On the lack of specificity in traditional public artworks see also Phillips, "Temporality and Public Art", 303.
39 Knight, *Public Art*, 98.
40 See, among others, Knight, *Public Art*, 97-99.
41 Phillips, "Temporality and Public Art", 297.
42 Ibid., 301.
43 This point seems to suggest that public artworks' "meaning" or "significance" are not timeless, but are a function (among other things) of the duration of an artwork's "life." I believe that this implication cannot be captured in terms of canonical Western theories of art.
44 Knight, *Public Art*, 169.
45 Phillips, "Temporality and Public Art", 297.

section, there are distinct and incompatible advantages to long-term public artworks, too. In this sense, I think that Knight is correct when suggesting that "permanent and temporary public artworks ought to be encouraged to coexist and reinforce one another."[46]

We have already seen public artworks that are temporary. In particular, Lacy's *Full Circle* and Christo and Jeanne-Claude's *The Umbrellas* possess those features that make them temporary public artworks. It must be emphasized that their ephemeral nature is (was) essential to their public success. If permanent, they would have raised so many concerns among the members of their public-art publics that it is unlikely that they would have ever been realized. By drawing on Paul O'Neill and Claire Doherty, I want to characterize temporary public artworks as those public artworks whose time-span of presentation lasts at most 100 days, a period of time that heuristically identifies the standard duration of a large-scale artistic exhibition.[47]

At this point let me introduce two further notions. I define the (intended) public-art publics of those projects as *temporary public-art publics*, and I call *temporary public-art spheres* the spaces within which members of temporary public-art publics discuss. It is my view that temporary public-art publics and spheres are fleeting phenomena. They quickly emerge in the immediate aftermath of the installation of (or the proposal of installing) particular public artworks. Then, briefly after the conclusion of the presentation of their respectively related public artworks, they dissolve. As a consequence of the confrontational quality of temporary public artworks, discussions within temporary public-art spheres are lively, and they often generate harsh controversies. However, very soon after the conclusion of the presentation, public interest in those discussions gradually dissipates. It is at that moment that temporary public-art spheres disappear.[48]

By understanding public-art publics and spheres as fleeting phenomena whose existence corresponds, with some tolerance, with the time-spans of presentation, I probably disagree with Knight's view. In fact, while discussing Christo and Jeanne-Claude's temporary works, Knight argues that:

> their projects are never really gone. While the physical objects may be dismantled after few weeks [almost three in the case of *The Umbrellas*], the art lives on through extensive visual documentation, and more importantly, throughout the memories of those who have seen it. In this way, Christo and Jeanne-Claude's works become the mental property of anyone who has experienced them, a thoroughly populist notion.[49]

I am skeptical about Knight's reconstruction of what happens once temporary public artworks such as Christo and Jeanne-Claude's *The Umbrellas* are dismantled or, more generally, their presentation ends. Of course, no one can deny that visual documentation and personal memories can testify to the existence of temporary public artworks from the past. However, such a testimony seems not to be enough for those artworks to keep encouraging that modality of discourse that makes *public* artworks what they are. In particular, first, by plausibly attracting the attention only of art enthusiasts, visual documentation seems not to encourage even in principle that kind of inclusive discussion that ideally characterizes debates of public art. And, second, personal memories hardly become the object of that mode of public discussion that we generally associate with public artworks. In this sense, I believe that it is unlikely that *The Umbrellas*' public-art public survived the end of its presentation (I am persuaded that it did not), and that, more generally, temporary public-art publics and spheres persist after the presentation of their respective public artworks has ended. It seems to me that the public attention and interest that a (successful) public artwork generates decay rather quickly once it recedes from view. In the absence of such attention and interest, the conditions of possibility for a public-art public (or sphere) to emerge simply do not obtain.

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46 Knight, *Public Art*, 170.

47 See O'Neill and Doherty, "Introduction", 5.

48 Recent historiographical researches on the public sphere have been exploring the "temporary" or "contingent" nature of some public spheres. See, for instance, Lake and Pincus, "Rethinking the Public Sphere in Early Modern England."

49 Knight, *Public Art*, 98.

7 Enduring public-art publics

Though scholarship on public art emphasizes the ability of temporary public artworks to engage temporary public-art publics successfully, some theorists have recently underlined that longer-term projects should still have an important place in the practices of public art. In particular, in a recently edited volume *Locating the Producers: Durational Approaches to Public Art*, through a detailed analysis of a series of case-studies, O'Neill and Doherty explore the artistic possibilities of temporally extended projects. Their case-studies include public artworks that are representative of the recent so-called "durational turn" in public art, such as Jeanne van Heeswijk's *The Blue House* (2004-09), Grizedale's *Creative Egremont* (2006-11), Tom van Gestel's *Beyond* (1999-2009), Kerstin Bergendal's *Trekroner Art Plan* (2001-13), and the Serpentine Gallery's *On the Edgware Road* (2009-11).

Consider as an example *The Blue House*. Conceived by artist Jeanne van Heeswijk, *The Blue House* started in 2005. In her project, van Heeswijk redesigned a large villa in a newly constructed neighborhood of Amsterdam (IJburg) as "a space for community research, artistic production and cultural activities."[50] Over a period of 4 years, *The Blue House* functioned as a public forum where many different actors (residents, artists, architects, thinkers, activists, writers, and scholars from different disciplines) could meet and collaborate for the creation of different initiatives. Those initiatives (which included, among others, the construction of a library, the realization of an outdoor cinema, and the arrangement of a series of artistic exhibitions) were all responding "directly to the needs and difficulties of residents during the construction phase."[51] Through the realization of those initiatives, *The Blue House* provided those emerging communities with public spaces and forums within which thematizing and making explicit the issues related to living in a newly constructed neighborhood. In particular, as O'Neill suggests, thanks to its enduring quality, *The Blue House* provided what Bruno Latour defines as "cohabitational time," a time where individuals can ask themselves questions such as: "Is there a way for all of us to survive together while none of our contradictory claims, interests and passions can be eliminated?"[52] By pondering the answer to that question (and similar others), those same individuals can bring into being new forms of social interaction in which "certain differences develop in dialogue with others."[53] In all likelihood, when considering *The Blue House*, a shorter time would not have allowed for such differences to come fully to light.[54]

I define artworks such as *The Blue House* as *enduring public artworks*, that is, artworks whose time-span of presentation lasts for more than 100 days (of course with some degree of approximation). As O'Neill argues, enduring public artworks facilitate the emergence of "a complex set of interactions" that cannot take place when considering shorter periods of time.[55] In effect, enduring artworks seem capable of creating and sustaining a deeper form of engagement—"a certain connectivity"—with the members of their respective public-art publics. I believe that O'Neill is correct when he adds that it is very difficult to obtain such deeper forms of engagement—what he defines as an "ethos of patience, perseverance and attentiveness"—when artworks come and go very quickly.[56] In this sense, enduring artworks are important since they provide the opportunity to engage members of public-art publics in a more sustained and intense way, thus promoting more structured forms of discussion.

I call the public-art publics that relate to enduring public artworks *enduring public-art publics*. I also define as *enduring public-art spheres* those spaces within which members of enduring public-art publics discuss. Enduring public-art publics are characterized by a long-term existence. By lasting a significant period of time, they allow their members to interact in a continuing and sustained way, which may result into the creation of deeper social bonds and exchanges. It must be emphasized that discussions within

50 O'Neill, "The Blue House (Het Blauwe Huis)", 20.
51 Ibid., 24.
52 Latour, "From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik", 40.
53 Ibid., 34.
54 By connecting Latour's view with pragmatist insights, Noortje Marres explores how long-term processes of issue formation are central to democratic life. See Noortje, "The Issues Deserve More Credit," 764.
55 O'Neill, "The Blue House," 50.
56 Ibid., 55.

enduring public-art spheres require particular attention in order to be kept alive. In effect, in a way rather different from what happens in engaging temporary public-art publics, not only artists must engage their selected public-art publics: they must also be ready to renegotiate such relationships over time.

In providing my analysis of enduring artworks and their related public-art publics and spheres, I am explicitly avoiding the term "permanent" for important reasons. First, "permanence" is often associated with "perpetuity." However, as Apgar argues, "nothing lasts forever," and those public artworks usually defined as permanent are "likely to last [only for a few] generations ... as an enduring bond."[57] In this sense "enduring" appears as a more accurate term for describing long-term public artworks and their respective public-art publics. Second, by preferring enduring over permanent, I intend to emphasize terminologically the contrast between traditionally so-called permanent public artworks and more modern projects, such as *The Blue House*. So-called permanent public artworks have often been unfortunate examples of "plop art" or what has been called "turds in the plaza," that is, artworks that are mere "placeholders," incapable of engaging their respective public-art publics. On the contrary, enduring public artworks share the specificity of temporary public artworks' strategies of public engagement, though in a temporally more extended framework.

8 Conclusion

My objective in this paper has been to elucidate the multiplicity of public-art publics and spheres, and to provide an extended (though partial) analysis of their heterogeneity. There is a multiplicity of public-art publics since, as a matter of fact, not all individuals are interested in the same public artwork(s). Different individuals are interested in different public artworks. But we should also understand public-art publics as a plurality in order to secure the success of our practices of public art. In effect, those artworks that aim at engaging a specific and limited set of individuals as their respective public-art publics are more likely to be successful as *public* artworks. By considering a series of case-studies, I have identified different (types of) public-art publics. By identifying different (types of) public-art publics, I have strengthened the case for MT. In particular, on the one hand, I have distinguished between three different conceptions of how extended a public-art public should be. For artists like Suzanne Lacy and her *Full Circle*, public-art publics include up to the residents of a city. For others, a public-art public can include the national population of a country. As an example of this trend, I have discussed Maya Lin's VVMW. Finally, I have found in Christo and Jeanne-Claude's *The Umbrellas* an example of a public artwork that aims at engaging as its public-art public a very large set of individuals living in different countries and interacting at a global level. On the other hand, by discussing some recent scholarship, I have also distinguished among public-art publics in terms of their temporal duration. Some artists construe their public-art publics as temporary, whereas, others see their public-art publics as enduring.

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57 Apgar, "Redrawing the Boundaries of Public Art", 27, 29n12, as quoted in Knight, *Public Art*, 98.

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