

## CITIZEN ARTIST

is something like sixty one million. By comparison, 130,000 visitors attending an art show staggered over several months is hardly worth mentioning. But it is mentioned. It is presented as if the event itself is significant in virtue of the sheer volume of visitors. And yet the proportion of the population who actually show an interest is minimal, to say the least.

This is not to be naive. Anyone who has knocked around in artistic circles knows that the proportion of people who are, even marginally, informed about the field are few. But that is not the point. What is at issue here is the cogency of the assumptions that artists commonly make as to whom they are addressing their work. Artists assume that there is an audience that is (at least potentially) interested in the details of their practice. They expect the audience to 'get it'. To 'understand' what they are saying. But to be understood the interlocutors have to be informed. Artist and audience have to share in a public discourse.

So again we have to ask, who exactly is the artists' audience? And how sophisticated is the level of discourse that issues from an artist's relation to an amorphous but potentially receptive mass? To gain a better idea of the nature of the public space and how we communicate in it, it may help to assess some popular concepts of the public that are in play in academic circles.

Jurgen Habermas's analysis of the public sphere is often commented upon and he argues that with the rise of bourgeois society in the 19th century came the impetus for a shared public space where self-reflective, rational and critical debate could be played-out. This sphere was occupied by government representatives and private individuals. Business men, politicians, artists, writers, the media etc. all sought out ways and means for examining the commercial and intellectual boundaries and powers of the emergent democratic state.(1)

Habermas contrasts this with contemporary attitudes and practices and suggests that throughout the 20th c, fact based critical analysis has degenerated into sensationalist 'infotainment', a consumer commodity. The idea of the public sphere is but a ghost of the past.

How does this compare with contemporary artistic attitudes? Habits die hard in my view and despite the PR spin, artists are often the last to grasp intellectual changes that have taken place in society. They often assume that there is a ready public that partakes in a critical examination of experience. The premise is that an artist's subjectivity is in itself emblematic of a public's interior experience. However, this notion is, at best, sentimental. It rides off the back of nostalgic feelings for

the past: Habermas' 19th century world populated by self-conscious individuals who saw a purpose for their artistic reflexive critique when stretching their economic muscles and expanding their political domain. This habit of mind no longer fits with the nature of the society we live with today. Today's 'public sphere'--say for example the art audience-- doesn't see itself in the machinations of the artists' efforts; it does not partake in an analytical discussion about art. It doesn't need to. We are not living in a period of political and economic expansion nor is democracy in its infancy. The instinct is not to put the resources of our self-reflection under the plow.

So where can we turn for help in understanding what constitutes the public space? The concept of the masses shaped social and political analysis throughout the 20th century. It is commonly characterized as a small set of ruling elites affecting, via persuasion, manipulation and/or coercion, an atomized, nebulous or amorphous mass. What is key here is that the means of communication was institutionalized and therefore, managed. In short, there were gatekeepers. The public space, its discourse, was edited, packaged, marketed, advertised and spun out via PR and broadcast networks. There were no genuine interlocutors as such. Artists responded by vying for power. The Avant Garde (The

### Who is the Artist's Audience?

One of the intentions of an artist is to present their work to an audience. The motive for this is not one of vanity or self-centeredness, but the desire to be part of a discourse. The desire to have their work, their perspective, be part of a conversation is a powerful one but here lies a dilemma: Who is the public? Who is the audience for the artist?

One hears reports in the media where record breaking numbers of visitors attended this or that exhibition but these observations are often made without context. A 'blockbuster' exhibition will attract on average 130,000 people. Approximately 250,000 people travel in and out of Waterloo station every day. Waterloo is one of 5 railway stations in London. The population of the United Kingdom

Dadaists through to the Situationists (2)) constructed elaborate strategies for addressing an audience directly, labelled mass produced artifacts as artworks, withdrew their participation in an art market etc., thereby hoping to usurp ideological centres of power. But with little effect.

This experience however of vying for power, this narrative, is still played out as if it were meaningful today. But unlike their predecessors, many artists have learned how to be 'professional'. They push and pull the levers of institutions (funding bodies through to media outlets), wear the clothes of public relations managers and behave like business men. Being professional is a tactic for soliciting customers and looking for investors to back a brand. The 'audience' is a commercial entity and within this marketplace the role of the artist, and what they can 'say', is reduced to that of caricature. I agree with Habermas, the marketplace has usurped the public space. I would go further and suggest that it has seized the imaginations of artists. Indeed, many understand it as the only reality.

Is there another way to see how an artwork can be the locus of communication? That is, how can the language of an artwork be an inherent part of a dialogue between artist and audience? A parallel question has been posed by

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (3) in their discussion about the relation of the populace to a sovereign: "How can we construct an apparatus for bringing together the subject (the multitude) and the object (cosmopolitan liberation) within post modernity?"

Much of the problem pivots on understanding what constitutes contemporary 'post-modern' society. Hardt and Negri suggest that it is constructed of a "plural multitude of productive, creative subjectivities". The multitude is 'nomadic', 'deterritorialized', "in perpetual motion". In short, the multitude is a boundless mass of networks of people who "express, nourish, and develop positively their own constituent projects"(p.61). Hardt and Negri have characterized a society that is peopled by active autonomous networks that inherently constitute the power of the sovereign.

What Hardt and Negri leave out is that the networks are also indifferent. They are amorphous and nebulous groupings, subjective and self-selecting alliances based on emotional need, shared ambitions and/or life style. They are not analytical or objective. The networks are, for the most part, family, friends and fans.

So where does this leave the artist? Floating on a sea of subjectivities? Locked into a reality where the level of discourse is framed

by our family, friends and fans' desires, the potential for art to critique that set of relations is curtailed by servicing tastes and trends. Art operates at the margins of our social exchange.

This may very well be the environment in which one has to operate. And yet I believe there are other paths to take. It requires thinking differently about the role of art in contemporary society and shaking off the last vestiges of post-modernist discourse (which is now too antiquated to serve any purpose). It requires putting aside the now empty notions of self-expression and authorship, of materiality and irony etc. and instead retrieve the debates that pivoted on the subject of Realism in the 19th century but atrophied after the First World War.

Here we see how the Realists sought to represent 'the truth'. They positioned themselves as witnesses and set out to depict the world as understood, not as it ought to be. But the mistake the artists of the 19th c made was in imagining that they were the key proponents in shaping representations of their society. They assumed they were the sole image-makers. But representations of ourselves, normative assumptions that justify actions in the public space, are many and varied. Hence, there is a real role for contemporary artists to reconfigure

the 'representations' of our social, psychological and political life and to engage with re-presentations that are problematic, even paradoxical when weighed against actuality. For it is in the paradox where the gap between normative assumptions about what we are contrasts with how we actually are. That is, the gap between the idealisms of a liberal democratic society and the reality of the protagonists in action.

So how does this answer our core problem? How can an artwork come to be embedded in 'common' discourse? How can one use the artwork (the language of the artwork) as a tool in public conversation? Part of the answer may be to conceive of art not as an object of discourse but as an agent: to shift the experience of art from a reflexive mode to an active one where the artwork is the locus of debate. Perhaps then we may see an increased sophistication in the level of public (artistic) dialogue and a revivification of art in shaping who we are.

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1) Habermas, Jurgen. (1962 trans 1989), *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Polity Press, Cambridge.

2) Other artists throughout the 60's and on (Fluxus and Conceptual artists) have pursued similar strategies. However, for the most part they have operated within the art gallery/marketplace.

3) Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, (2000), *Empire*, Harvard University Press