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## **New genre public commission?**

### **The subversive dimension of public art in post-Fordist capitalism**

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#### ***Abstract***

*Does public art (still) have subversive power in the context of Western post-Fordist capitalism? As has already been demonstrated, the emergence of a cognitive capitalism is closely linked to the integration within the market system of the claim for autonomy and self-management, the quest for originality and even the aesthetic of the critical movements of the 1960's and 1970's. This process resulted in a partial neutralization of the subversive dimension of art, which used to be at the core of the counterculture.*

*In order to understand the relation between art and critique, our study aims to analyze the historical evolution and differentiation of the regimes of production of public art. Formerly a State prerogative, public art developed its critical potential with the emergence of non-commissioned interventions in the public space. Enacting the shift to cognitive capitalism and creative city policies, public art programs resort now to methods and aesthetics of grassroots movements, this time without any critical discourse.*

*The analysis is based on an ongoing ethnographical and historical research on various examples of public art commands in Switzerland that question the integration of the public in the selection process and entail the recuperation of practices that were primarily bound to anti-establishment movements. Observing the way public art is produced, we interrogate the very possibility for artists to remain critical when the main concerns of the institutions are to avoid public controversies and to secure funding. With its conceptual and empirical approach, this study takes part to a wider academic debate on the role of art, activism, and the urban space.*

Long dominated by classical sculpture, art in the public space in Europe mainly played a commemorative role until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The construction of allegorical monuments or monuments depicting incarnations of social order (political and military leaders, scholars, or intellectuals) served as a staging of power, ultimately designed to justify a certain organization of the world (Ruby, 1998), and to legitimize States' actions while strengthening the collective identities of nations (Zask, 2013). Artistic production as a mode of subverting forms of established power did not exist *stricto sensu*, as public art was meant to be a reflection of it – although certain forms of critique or satire might have existed within commissioned art. Lefebvre likewise reminds us that all monuments, landscapes and spatial arrangements are the products of a ruling class, and therefore of power (Lefebvre, 1974). The late 19<sup>th</sup> century (and 20<sup>th</sup> century to an even greater extent) nevertheless saw the emergence of more critical art forms – particularly as regards the conditions of its production and the challenging of its own codes. The result was the founding of various avant-garde movements, and later – often tied to revolutionary movements – of art that explicitly critiqued or more fundamentally subverted<sup>1</sup> society and its political and social organization. These works, which reflected art's subversive nature, are inherently dissentive and undermine in various ways capitalist, bourgeois social and political order (Kaprow, 1967).

This quest for subversiveness in art has created a paradox for public art commissions. To what extent is it possible for states to commission artistic interventions designed to upset the established order in public spaces?

In this chapter we will defend the argument that this paradox has been partly attenuated by the historical integration of the subversive dimension of counterculture within the contemporary public commission process, and the modes of production of urban order more broadly. In other words, what was once subversive in terms of artistic intervention is now a common aspect of the interplay between art and urban development. Thus, for example, the *temporary* dimension of artistic intervention – once the crux of the subversive tactics of happenings – has become typical in the utilization of artistic events in urban marketing strategies. It is not that art has lost its characteristics *per se* - especially the ones that were the attributes of its 'radicality' - but rather that it has lost its power to upset the established order, *i.e.* its subversiveness. Radicality must be understood as a relational attributes of art, one that is precisely manifested through its ability to subvert the established order. Such a relational approach calls therefore for a combined analysis of the evolution of art theory and practices and of the context of production and reception of artistic interventions.

In this perspective, we set forth to analyze the process of the relative loss of the subversive power of European and North American counterculture art in three steps. First, we will step back and look at the subversive potential of art as one possible outcome of its more fundamental political power. Next, we will analyze what exactly constituted the subversive dimension of the artistic interventions of the European counterculture of the 1960's and 1970's. Finally, we will show how those vectors of subversion have been contained by the new order of public commission and its broader relationship to the contemporary, post-Fordist, capitalist city. This is not to say that art has lost all of its subversive potential or monumental functions, but simply that its ability to question the established order is no longer as apparent as in the 1960's and 1970's. As we will argue, public art finds its critical edge in the revamped relationship between art, politics and capitalism.

### **The politics of art**

Underlying the question of art's subversive potential is broader thinking with regard to the art's role in the social and political realms, which in turn questions its role in the production of symbols and legitimization of forms of government.

For Eve Chiapello (and Luc Boltanski), the subversive potential of art is – or rather is *part of* – the *libertarian* dimension of the social struggles of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries that then combined with a *social* dimension ('social critique'), which they interpret as the struggle for equality (Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999). Heuristic though it may be, this approach separates politics (the desire for emancipation and democracy) and the social dimension (the desire for social justice and class struggles) somewhat too artificially. Hannah Arendt also seems to do this in *On Revolution*<sup>2</sup>. Art is limited neither to its discursive power nor to the commentary it makes on the world, which do not take into account the performative, pre-figurative and diagrammatic dimensions of what art does and makes distinctions that, historically, do violence to events, especially those of the Parisian events of May 1968 (Lazzarato, 2014).

In order to forge a more comprehensive understanding of art's political dimension (and, as such, its subversive potential), one can turn to authors like Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, or more recently, Jacques Rancière. For Deleuze and Guattari, the subversive nature of art goes far beyond mere discourse or a shift of perspective (*i.e.* seeing the world differently). According to them, art moves lines<sup>3</sup>, and is therefore representative of the world to come (Deleuze & Guattari, 2005, pp. 176, 183).

In a somewhat similar perspective, Rancière speaks of the ‘*politics of literature*’ in describing literature’s purpose and the lines it shifts. However, we feel it would be more accurate to speak of ‘*politics of art*’ in general, to better reflect the power of art (Rancière, 2009, pp. 591-606; Nicolas-Le Strat, 2015, p. 36). In *The Distribution of the Sensible* (2000), he evokes an aesthetic that is the basis for all political organization in the world, in that it defines what is – figuratively speaking – visible and audible. It is this *sharing*, as distribution and re-distribution of the sensible, that determines who can be seen and heard, who can see and tell and, consequently, who organizes the space each person occupies in participation in the ‘Common’.

With Rancière’s approach, *all* artistic practice is highly political in its relationship to the world, and gives rise to its techniques and forms, regardless of the message that it does or does not purport to convey. For Rancière, for example, it is no coincidence that the rise of the revolutionary movements of the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century coincided with the emergence of new art forms that blurred the boundaries between mediums. This redefinition of the relationship between observer and the observed led to a reformulating of the world's political organization.

*“It is initially in the interface created between different ‘mediums’ – in the connections forged between poems and their typography or their illustrations, between the theatre and its set designers or poster designers, between decorative objects and poems – that this ‘newness’ is formed that links the artist who abolishes figurative representation to the revolutionary who invents a new form of life”* (Rancière, 2000 [2006], p. 16).

Within this broader understanding of the founding role of artistic expression, art (and its *encaissement*<sup>4</sup> in the form of ‘culture’) can no longer be treated as a mere reflection of processes of production, as it was in certain obtuse forms of Marxist orthodoxy. In this perspective, Gramsci marked an important milestone in overcoming this narrow conception of culture as a superstructure. For Raymond Williams:

*It is Gramsci’s great contribution to have emphasized hegemony, and also to have understood it at a depth which is, I think, rare. For hegemony supposes the existence of something which is truly total, which is not merely secondary or superstructural, like the weak sense of ideology, but which is lived at such a depth, which saturates the society to such an extent, and which, as Gramsci put it, even constitutes the substance and limit of common sense for most people under its sway, that it corresponds to the reality of social experience very much more clearly than any*

*notions derived from the formula of base and superstructure.* (Williams, in Durham & Kellner, 2006, p. 134-135)

Art – and more generally all that participates in the (re)configuring of the sensible and intelligible framework of our experience – thus fully contributes to the mode of production. Yet, while we started our reflection with the subversive potential of art, it is worth noting that art, as part of the *infrastructure*, can function either as a *shift* or as a *reinforcing* of the boundaries of a given political order. In any cases, in order to have subversive potential, art's constitutive power to act and have an impact on the world must be recognized.

The hegemonic power Gramsci describes therefore is built on a broad basis, in which culture is an important pillar in the reproduction of social relations well beyond the symbolic level. If capitalism is upheld by culture – by building an *ethos* that hinders the moral and intellectual empowerment of the masses (Tosel, 2005) – it is also *by* and *through* art that the revolution must occur, through the building of an organic culture that breaks with dominant ideology and redefines common sense and our resulting relationship to the world. For Gramsci, artists – like intellectuals and journalists – are instigators of a cultural order that will or will not lead to emancipation.

Rancière suggests that this organic culture plays out, for example, in the reinvention of typographies, like in the *Arts & Crafts* movement<sup>5</sup>, or in the shift from written to theatrical expression. The politics of art thus goes far beyond the merely symbolic content of art, and rather lies in its ability to contribute to the production of actual counter-hegemonies.

As Chantal Mouffe (2009) explained, the politics of art play out on a number of levels. Borrowing from Gramsci's concept of 'cultural hegemony' – as a participation of culture in the process of production more than a conception of culture as a 'superstructure' –, Mouffe, in her theory of agonistic democracy, offers a unique perspective on the role of art and artists in the construction of political confrontation. For Mouffe, political arenas are, in fact, *made* of this confrontation (via democratic tools) between non-reconcilable, hegemonic political projects. These hegemonies, once established, rely at the same time on a system of practices and the production of symbols and identities to legitimize and sustain themselves. Capitalism, for example, has instilled the identity of the consumer – particularly through advertising – to the point that modes of consumption have become core elements in the creation of subjectivities. So art, as an important creator of symbols, contributes to the founding of an *ethos* and is on the frontline of the reproduction – or challenging – of hegemony. That is why, for Mouffe, the political dimension of art, whatever form it takes, is undeniable:

*In that context, artistic and cultural practices are absolutely central as one of the levels where identifications and forms of identity are constituted. One cannot make a distinction between political art and non-political art, because every form of artistic practice either contributes to the reproduction of the given common sense – and in that sense is political – or contributes to the deconstruction or critique of it. Every form of art has a political dimension. (Mouffe et al., 2001, p.98)*

Specifying this latter point in later texts (2007; 2014), Mouffe identifies four ways of intervention for critical artistic production. The first is direct involvement in political debate, which could be called commitment through ‘message’; the second is a form of involvement through the exploration exclusion, marginalization and victimization phenomena; the third is self-reflection (by artists themselves) regarding the political conditions of their production; and finally, involvement through experimentation and the creation of utopias that oppose the values of the capitalist *ethos*. It is ultimately in this last form that art can best deploy its subversive potential in deconstructing common sense. In this respect, Mouffe again joins Gramsci; her artist – the initiator of new common sense – is similar to the Gramscian concept of the organic intellectual who lays the symbolic and semiotic bases of revolution. Mouffe maintains the essentially political dimension of art. As she well shows, this political nature cannot simply be reduced to forms of ‘socially-engaged art,’ which is political in the very message it conveys. This form of (public) involvement of art, which functions on a meaningful level, couples with what it does semiotically, above and beyond ‘simple’ meaning. We can say here that art functions ‘diagrammatically’ – in Deleuze and Guattari’s sense of the word –, *i.e.* not (only) by representing the world differently but by moving its lines of force.

In an earlier work (Piraud & Pattaroni, 2016), we identified three levels of politics of art (*i.e.* levels on which art can make a *difference* or contribute to the reproduction of a *hegemony*) which, though based on different theoretical foundations, in a certain regard join the four levels of which Mouffe (2007; 2014) speaks. The first level acts as a process of *signification*, with a long tradition of political art that focuses on the *message* expressed and its various forms. Based on interpretative elements, this regime functions via the *semiotics* of its content. We have called the second level of overlap the *diagrammatic* regime, borrowing Guattari’s term. This regime performs the function of a-signifying and a-subjective power of art. “*The work of the diagram [...] tends to the ‘capture of forces’, to making ‘insensible forces sensible’*” (Alliez, 2013, p. 10); put differently, how art interacts with the world and influences identities and subjectivities. On the third level, art was used in politics via its *processes of production* –how art functions in the market system, the spaces it occupies, its

temporality and distribution networks, etc., all of which are examples of what determines contemporary artistic production and the function it serves.

What should be remembered from what has been said thus far is that the political implications of art cannot be reduced to its critical or subversive dimensions. Rather, these implications play out in the way that art contributes to creating a shared reality. Thus, insofar as it figures and prefigures the world through the distribution of the sensible and the creation of subjectivities, art is *fundamentally* political. Thus, as it produces or reproduces a common sense that either moves or upholds the lines of force of an established order, it takes part in the politics. That is to say, the political nature of art is not limited to subversion but rather is the intrinsic nature of art.

Nevertheless, one can argue that the artistic movements at the root of the European and North American counterculture of the 1960's and 1970's – influenced by Adorno among others – associated the political dimension of art with its subversive dimension. We must now seek to better grasp wherein lay their subversive potential relative to the then prevailing and hegemonic symbolic and sensitive established order – *i.e.* in Rancière's terms the 'distribution of the sensible' of the times.

### **Constituents of the subversive potential**

The artistic movements or groups (*e.g.* the Situationists, the Living Theater, Fluxus or their predecessor: Dada<sup>6</sup>) that influenced or directly participated in the creation of what has been broadly referred – mainly in the European and North American context – as the 'counterculture' (Williams, 2006) shared certain strategies for imbuing their artistic intervention with a disruptive effect. Among others, one thinks of the intertwining of playfulness and spontaneity of their interventions (*e.g.* the situationist '*dérive*' method; Debord, 1958), the blurring of the social and visual borders between the public and private spheres, artist and audience (Schechner, 1965) or between life and art more generally. These strategies disturbed and disrupted the hegemonic distribution of the sensible of the Fordist system and its urban correlate – the functionalist city – based on strict and linear borders between the public and private spheres, between work, domestic life and leisure, and adherence to rationalist planning methods.

It is impossible to analyze all of these tactics, which likewise permeated and transformed the repertoire of political action (Cogato et al., 2013), in a single chapter. Rather, we will focus on one of the key constituents of the counterculture's subversive powers: the systematic recourse to temporariness and ephemerality.



Indeed, at the roots of artistic protest movements claiming to be *anti-art*, like Dada or the Fluxus group, one finds a systematic recourse to performance and happenings based on a principle of temporariness<sup>7</sup>. This mode of artistic production was meant to be subversive as it presented various sources of disruption. Firstly, it created a rupture with the world's long term temporal organization – another central element of the distribution of the sensible – that is one of the conquests of capitalism (Thompson, 1967). Secondly, ephemerality also objects to what was one of the first justifications for art in the public space, namely the commemoration and expression of established power, which, by analogy, necessitate sustainability. Finally, the subversive power of ephemerality also resides in the fact that it allows for an escape from the canonical framework of the production system of artistic value. In *Loft Living*, Sharon Zukin shows how in the 1960's some artists, in rebellion against galleries and the art market, began to create works that could not be owned – notably monumental works and land art (Zukin, 1982). As they were non-transportable, these works required movement on the part of the audience in order to view them and made inclusion in any collection impossible. This refusal to be 'captured' in a collection also sometimes came with a rejection of the label 'monument.' In this regard, Gordon Matta-Clark's cutouts<sup>8</sup>, for example, act as 'non-uments' (Kirschner, 1985).

Similar thinking is behind the idea of performances and ephemeral installations. By becoming a 'moment' rather than an object – by separating from its own materiality – art escapes the logic of accumulation that is the basis of capitalist functioning. And this is deeply subversive in relation to an art market that works by transforming the piece of art into a tradable object with a specific value.

Ephemeral approaches played an important role in the evolution of public art. Indeed, in response to 'official,' 'imperial' public art, which was seen as a vehicle of social exclusion, the 1960's onwards saw the emergence of new forms of anti-establishment artistic expression, often allied with urban struggle movements seeking to draw attention to the struggle for control of the urban environment and its aesthetics (Sharp, Pollock & Paddison, 2005). Termed '*new genre public art*' (Lacy, 1994) by artist Suzanne Lacy, these movements – which were critical of the role of artistic actors in exclusive urban development that promoted the accumulation of capital in the hands of ruling classes – led to artistic interventions in public spaces aimed at putting art back into the democratic debate by challenging underlying forms of domination.

Ephemerality thus became one of the tools, along with festive events and techniques such as situationist '*dérive*', counterculture art used to denounce and subvert the process of commodification of the urban space and the resulting exclusion.

One can argue that the idea of the subversive dimension of ephemerality gained momentum and was generalized with the shift toward something akin to a *post-modernity* after the Avant-gardes – what Guattari called the ‘*winter years*’ of the 1980’s. Indeed, following Soviet sclerosis, when the alternative to State communism had ceased to be attractive, the revolutionary idea undoubtedly moved towards an *insurrectionary* target: permanent movement and acceleration became a way of objecting to any form of established authority. This turning point is particularly palpable in Hakim Bey’s famous *Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ)*, originally published in 1985. For Bey, ‘reaction’ always follows revolution, ‘like seasons in Hell,’ and therefore is no longer enviable since it inevitably ends in oppressive stabilization in an order that smothers potential subjectivity (“*The slogan ‘Revolution!’ has mutated from tocsin to toxin, a malign pseudo-Gnostic fate-trap, a nightmare where no matter how we struggle we never escape that evil Aeon, that incubus the State, one State after another, every ‘heaven’ ruled by yet one more evil angel*” (Bey, 1997, p. 5)).

Thus, Bey gives an exemplary interpretation of the subversive and emancipatory power of ephemerality. With a wary eye towards any form of institution, Bey wrote of TAZ, “[it] temporarily occupies a territory in space, time or the imagination, and dissolves when identified” (ibid., p.5). In the tradition of ‘pirate utopias’ and ‘cyberpunks,’ it is a permanent de-territorialization that acts as shared potential. (“*Like festivals, uprisings cannot happen every day – otherwise they would not be ‘non-ordinary.’ But such moments of intensity give shape and meaning to the entirety of a life. The shaman returns – you can’t stay up on the roof forever – but things have changed, shifts and integrations have occurred – a difference is made*” (ibid., p.5). In a way, TAZ therefore echoes *A Thousand Plateaus*, wherein Deleuze and Guattari developed a theory of nomadism as a war machine<sup>9</sup>. This idea of subversion through movement undoubtedly joins and expands the thinking of Peter Bürger (1974) and Jean Dubuffet (1986), for whom the Avant-gardes and artists respectively had to emancipate themselves from the threat that the institutionalization of art pose, *i.e.* the ‘asphyxiating’ power of Culture with a capital C.

Those tactics of the ephemeral were also linked with attempts to give power back to the audience, which are another source of subversion of academic art. The Dada movement already invited, in the 1920’s, the public to participate in its artistic happenings (Bishop, 2006).

### **The commandeering of subversive art?**

We will now analyze the apparent paradox between public commissions and subversive art in greater detail. As we have suggested, this paradox is only partially true, as many processes have occurred since the 1960’s that profoundly change the subversive impact of counterculture art, and the impact of

temporary tactics in particular. To summarize, ephemerality is less and less a vector of subversiveness in societies where the distribution of the sensible is based on mobility and events. As we will argue in our conclusion, it is now, on the contrary, *continuity* that has become subversive. Thus, while the critical and subversive potential of art and artists today is undebatable, the conditions and context of this critique and subversion are themselves questionable.

De facto, the contemporary paradox of the commandeering – by public or private actors – of artistic practices largely influenced by the Avant-Garde movement is multifaceted. Before focusing how the subversive power of temporariness has been partially contained, it is important to briefly explore some of these different facets which, as we will see center around the various dimensions of the three levels of politics of art mentioned earlier.

A first, critical point is that of art's autonomy in a context where artists depend on grants and acquisitions from public institutions<sup>10</sup> in order to survive – a point raised by Rainer Rochlitz (1994). One may ask to what extent the states related actors – employees of cultural public offices or elected politicians who function as important patrons of artistic production – accepts criticism, the questioning of order (of which it is the manifestation) and, more importantly, its own functioning. The 1960's saw the propagation of artistic interventions whose critical dimension was a constitutive part. This often played out in the first level of overlap between art and politics – the symbolic level of the relationship between the signifier and the signified –, such as in cases where politically explicit content of a publicly commissioned exhibition is called into question.

In Switzerland, one of the most resounding examples of such a clash between political interests and artistic autonomy is what the press called the Hirschhorn case. In 2004, the Swiss Cultural Centre in Paris hosted Thomas Hirschhorn's *Swiss-Swiss Democracy* exhibition. Hirschhorn, who is extremely critical of the Swiss democratic system (whereby, in 2003, an extreme right-wing leader was elected to the federal government) caused a significant media and political scandal, giving rise to a parliamentary debate after which Pro Helvetia, the State-run foundation responsible for the Swiss Cultural Centre, saw its budget slashed by one million francs (Dubey, 2006). In addition to the controversial content of the exhibition, the issue also laid in its *mode of production*, i.e. the fact that the exhibition was presented in a federal institution and that this institution supposedly represents Switzerland's cultural production in a foreign country. One could speculate that such an exhibition in a private venue would not have ruffled so many feathers. Such cases are undoubtedly an exemplary illustration of the way even if public funds are enabling artistic interventions they also hold the many attachments through which the subversive potential of art is contained. Such controversies lay the

foundations for necessary debate on the notions of freedom and artistic exception vis-à-vis (public or private) sponsors' power.

Moreover, as suggested in our brief analysis of the fundamental relationship between art and politics, there are many other ways – in addition to the critical judgment expressed through works – through which the latter may take on a subversive role. In order to grasp them, it is particularly interesting to turn to the case of art in the public space. Indeed, it is exemplary of this complex encounter with the question of politics and criticism, as it is inherently subjected to legal scrutiny and order. In this regard, three points can help us consider the possible weakening of the critical power of artistic intervention in the public space.

First and foremost is what might be considered the subjugation of cultural policies to the production strategies of the city. In keeping with the thinking on the creative economy underlying the debate with regard to urban development, support policies for artistic production and exhibition are no longer merely cultural tools but tools of economic promotion and marketing. Through the concept of the *Artistic Mode of Production*, Sharon Zukin showed how the increasing valuation of artistic production (and particularly its consumption) in America in the 1960's was commandeered by market forces in order to transform and redevelop urban centers (Zukin, 1989).

Since then, numerous works have explored the links between cultural policies and urban strategies (artistic support and housing (Deutsche & Ryan, 1984), museum policies (Evans, 2003; Maeder, 2015; Olu, 2008); State-funded public art programs (Cameron & Coaffee, 2005; Hall & Robertson, 2001; Mathews, 2010). The installation of works of art in the public space has been legitimized by discourse based on socio-spatial expectations (*i.e.* creating a contemporary aesthetic, strengthening local identity, attracting investments, etc.), that were later subsumed into the 'Creative City' discourse (Florida, 2002; Landry, 1995). That is to say, since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, art in the public space is no longer justified simply by arguments about the meaning of works, but rather its externalities and potential effects on the urban fabric. This integration of public art into the logics of production of urban forms has been likened, by certain authors, to the instrumentalization of artists, to legitimize a kind of subordination and reconquering of the urban space by State and financial powers (Deutsche, 1992). In a certain respect, such artistic interventions function in the same way monuments commissioned to proclaim the glory of a king or the wealth of a city once did. This is characteristic of the new functioning of cognitive capitalism and the process of spatial production it fosters, in order to reinvent monumentality, *i.e.* artists' involvement in improvement and enhancement policies.

Secondly, public art's high exposure to the critical judgment of the media and the public – not to mention fear of being a source of controversy for those involved in public commissions – tend to orient production towards more consensual forms. The rejection of contemporary art by public opinion has been the subject of numerous works, especially in France subsequent to (and undoubtedly given the failure of) policies to democratize access to contemporary art (Heinich, 2000; Michaud, 2011; Ruby, 2002). In an article published in 1989, Patricia Phillips denounced the standardization and bureaucratization of public commission programs leading, she claimed, to the smothering of more anti-establishment forms of expression. For Phillips, the complexity of selection processes, the increasing inclusion of the uninitiated (to make art 'more accessible' to society) and constant fear of scandal have led to a mentality of minimum risk, and even self-censorship, in anticipation of negative reactions and criticism of work considered too subversive or too provocative: *"So every possible – and ludicrous – objection is raised at the early stages of the artist selection and proposal process, to anticipate and fend off any possible community disfavor. With programs dependent on such tightly woven sieves, it's not surprising that plenty of hefty, powerful projects don't make their way through"* (Phillips, 2004 [1989], p. 195). Steven Dubin studying the Artist-in-Residence program in Chicago in the 80's, demonstrated how the meeting of diverging interests (of artists, curators and politicians) produces a specific form of culture and social organization from which emerge safe, uncontroversial works that are easily accessible to the public (Dubin, 1985; 1986).

### **Public art and containment**

Alongside these two processes already broadly addressed in the literature, one can identify a third, less explored one that touches more directly on the crux of subversive works as they have developed in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, today we are witnessing – at least in European and North American post-industrialized democratic countries – the trivialization of artistic forms, both in their production methods and the sensible registers they produce, that were once the prerogative of alternative or protest movements by hegemonic groups and institutions. This holds true, for instance, for modes of expression like tagging and, more generally, the lessening of the *semiotics* (and 'aesthetics') of the counterculture for the commercial motives of contemporary design, thus dulling the subversive impact resulting from the use of alternative production methods (self-management, illegality, etc.) (Carmo et al., 2014). More subtly still, it is also the case, as we would like to show in this chapter, of the banalization of temporary artistic intervention formats. Whereas once a tool of subversion, ephemeral has, in recent years, become one of the mechanisms for incorporating art in the city's systems of market production. Through festivals and happenings, ephemerality has become part of the contemporary broadening of the legitimate and market-oriented modalities of public art. To understand this shift, we must return to the very evolution of capitalist forms and the way it

contributed to the generalization and legitimization of an order based on mobility (and the ephemerality of projects).

The development of post-Fordist capitalism – what Guattari called ‘*integrated world capitalism*’ – is the result of the incorporating of a desire for autonomy, decentralized management and, in a way, the modes of artistic production that characterized the critical movements of the 1960’s and 1970’s, into a market system (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2011). As works that thematize ‘cognitive capitalism’ show, *immaterial productions*, which represent an increasingly significant portion of production in general, are much more efficient when produced in non-hierarchical networks, which allows for greater use of general intellect (Moulier-Boutang 2007; Negri, 1991; Hardt & Negri, 2000, 2004). In other words, we again find here the moving, nomadic, ephemeral act – conceptualized in *A Thousand Plateaus* and *TAZ* – as the carrier of the radical production of a ‘Common’ in movement. Yet, this permanent deterritorialization has proven useful and extremely effective in liberating value added, and thus has been incorporated into the managerial lexicon (Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999). Some see this (relative) horizontalization of productive and reproductive relationships as a step towards emancipation, the beginning of the end of oppressive hierarchies, or even ‘communism in capitalism’ (without anyone daring to deny new specific forms of exploitation). Others, however, see it as a shameless ‘distorting’ of the social struggles of the 1960’s and 1970’s.

In such situations, where mobility has been placed at the core of the capitalist production of both goods and urban development, the danger of artistic movements claiming ephemerality and interstitial actions is their tendency to make order acceptable, a kind of carnival or valve effect that turns ambiguity into criticism in action. Hence something happens, a kind of integrating of the critique that becomes acceptable due to its ephemeral nature.

This process of incorporation leads to a partial neutralization of the subversive potential of artistic production (Mouffe, 2008). In a previous paper (Carmo et al., 2014), we identified the phenomenon whereby the broad dissemination of formal registers produced through alternative or oppositional practices freed such forms from their original relationship of meaning by turning them into ‘*floating signifiers*’, in the words of Levi-Strauss (2003, p. XLIX), and thus stealing their critical potential.

The same type of process is at work in art in the public space. As already said, in recent decades, this type of intervention has gradually become part of public commission programs. These movements, once dissentient, critical and anti-institutional, saw their methods and their militant, socially-engaged semiotic systems (their aesthetic?) trivialized to the point that “*while in theory refractory, [they*

*found] an institution eager to get on board, and that encouraged them through direct solicitation: production, artistic commissions and events”* (Ardenne, 2009, p. 195). And so emerged a series of initiatives – mainly at the instigation of local authorities through public art programs and urban policies – aimed at getting art back into public hands. At the heart of these approaches was the idea of participation (Hall & Robertson, 2001), which can take many forms – from genuine inclusion in creative processes (process-based or process-oriented approaches) to consideration of expectations in the public contracts. In reality, however, these approaches were more often than not devoid of any critical basis.

Their subversive *mode* has, to some degree, been incorporated into institutional public commissions through its system of symbols but, more importantly, through the filtering down of approaches that were once the prerogative of alternative spheres – such as the ephemeral and the participatory. While these approaches originally aimed to step outside the lines by upsetting conventions and uses of urban space (*e.g.* the urban drifting of the Stalker group, or Stanley Brouwn’s series *This way Brouwn*<sup>11</sup>), their commandeering by the State seems to have had the opposite effect.

Through commandeering, ephemerality become a perfect tool for the ‘eventifying’ of cultural policies and programs for art in the public space, which are now designed to serve cities’ economic development and help commodify urban space and time (Ambrosino, 2012; Chaudoir, 2007; Vivant, 2008). Here again, the subversive dimensions underlying the idea of ephemeral art have been neutralized. Conversely, temporary actions are increasingly seen as a way not to consolidate and fix political action; to minimize potential controversies and act quickly to address specific, measurable policy objectives (*e.g.* improving neighborhood image, awareness, mediation, social work, etc.) by ‘governing through the objective’ (Thevenot, 2011; 2014).

Participation underwent a process that is quite similar to that which affects temporary art production, and made it drift away from the intentions of the pioneers, like Dada or Happening artists, to blur the boundaries and the conventions of art (Schechner, 1965; Butt, 2001). Attempts to include the ‘audience’ – with the multiple realities this word may define (Zask, 2013) – in the production of works began to abound in the 1990’s, presumably when works ceased to be the initiative of isolated artists, and instead became an integral component of cultural democratization policies. In public commission procedures, the participatory argument is often justified by the desire to reduce the cognitive distance between creation and exhibition of works, to bring the artist closer to her or his audience. While the participation process might be an interesting vehicle for mediation, it is not without negative consequences.

Indeed, this approach wherein artistic production is more or less subjected to the likes and dislikes of the public, can be seen as a form of populism. By implicitly comparing co-produced, accessible and aesthetically pleasing art with pressing, elitist art that is deemed to ‘uglify’ the urban space, discourse extolling the inclusion of the public is akin to populism (Deutsche, 1992), becoming a tool of political strategies. Thus, in Geneva, it is interesting that the first demand request by the public for inclusion in the artistic selection process in the late 1970’s came from *Vigilance* – a far right-wing party<sup>12</sup> – which proposed that the winners of public art competitions be chosen by popular vote. The intent here was clearly not emancipatory, but rather opposition to the city’s artistic policy acquisition, with the argument of preserving the public interest. Note that between the 1960’s and 1990’s, a number of major controversies associated with the installation of public works took place in Geneva. In 1982, the same party mobilized the residents of Alfred-Bertrand Park to object to the installation of a monumental work given to the city by American artist Dennis Oppenheim.

More generally, we can defend the idea that the blurring strategies of the 1960’s – where art and life were one – had a perverse effect, as the appraisal of commissioned artistic interventions has changed not only in terms of their artistic value, but also their compliance, with increasingly complex urban regulations (hygiene, security, mobility, etc.). For example, as Nathalie Heinich suggested, in considering the controversy surrounding Serra’s *Titled Arc* and several other cases of criticism addressed to public artworks, the use of ‘civic principle’ to judge public art is to a certain extent more legitimate in the United States than in France (Heinich, 2000). This seems even truer as regards the contemporary commissioning of temporary artistic interventions. Thus, in a recent public event in Geneva where various artists were invited to produce work on the relationship between the city and the countryside, a proposal to put sheep in a suburban middle-class housing project was denied by Geneva’s state health services. Because of their temporary nature and blurred boundaries – and the relative ambiguity of what art is and is *not* – the very essence of artistic interventions has been stifled by the need to fit into the larger system of urban regulation, as norms allow for no exceptions.

The advent of the temporary and participatory dimensions – and hence attention paid to public reactions – in artistic interventions add to complex process of containing their subversive potential. Our final example aptly illustrates how a counterculture artistic project (and ephemerality in particular) ends up becoming part of the contemporary production of the city, so much so that it does not even raise public controversy. The Geneva association *Espace Temporaire* (ET) is an interesting example of the ambiguous effects of counterculture discourse and tactics (and temporariness most notably), resulting in both a renewal of critique and a lessening of art’s subversive potential. ET



(described as ‘*a laboratory for art and collective action*’) clearly thrives on what could be called an alternative grammar, meaning a repertoire of strong political proposals for the three facets of the politics of art. The title is a more or less direct indication of TAZ’s influence in Geneva’s alternative community (the text circulated in squats and was often discussed and alluded to). ET draws from the lexicon of the interstitial (*‘Off spaces are interstitial, off screen spaces still to be discovered, created or simply imagined’* (Espace Temporaire)) and the ephemeral. The idea is clear: *‘The temporary occupation of the urban space questions the notion of a ‘clean and ordered’ city. It generates experimental situations with social space, creating areas of mutual dialogue and sharing. Through various mechanisms and off-kilter initiatives, Espace Temporaire experiments with the nomadic and spontaneous, imposes an unexpected presence, builds relationships, leaves a trail, and disappears only to reappear elsewhere’* (Espace Temporaire).

Among ET’s more institutionalized activities, one finds a kiosk in a tramway station that has been turned into a small art gallery—a showcase for temporary public art. The kiosk’s location and temporary nature potentially allow for disruptive displays. Nonetheless, as the following example shows, its temporariness also allows for reactivity and appeasement when public controversy rears its head. In spring 2013, the gallery exhibited ‘*Cheval de Bataille*’, by Maya Bösch and Régis Golay, a stuffed horse suspended from two straps, its head hanging, frustrated by “*all forfeited battles – large and small – especially those that remain invisible, hidden in the streets, behind closed windows, in the hearts of humans*” (Bösch & Golay, 2013). The horse, long forgotten in the warehouses of the *Comédie de Genève*, was acquired in 2005 for a staging of Shakespeare’s *Richard III* (as ‘both accessory and centerpiece’). The artwork is simple, but the idea is scathing and serves as reference to Richard III who, “*during the inexorable conquest of power, suffered absolute defeat.*” The reactions of the public were violent, and resulted in a major media and political controversy, notably via readers’ letters to local papers (“*You artists deserve to be hanged instead of the horse*”). The exhibition was quickly shut down by the curators themselves, due most likely to considerable pressure and fear of political repercussions against the gallery<sup>13</sup>. The complex artistic proposition, echoing among other things Maya Bösch’s staging of *Richard III*, illustrates Phillips’s idea that, in order to be successful, public art must not make waves. ‘Battle Horse,’ however – with neither cartel nor comment – did not result in the work’s success, but instead led to self-censorship by the curators.

Ephemeral interventions thus tend to lose their ‘guerilla’ edge, becoming part of an urban order that systematically oversees all of the entities that exist within it and pawns in larger marketing strategies. Though the potentially subversive diagrammatic effects of temporary tactics partially lose their disruptive potential. The same is true for the subversive dimension of temporary and collective

interventions, as they take place within a broader system of production based on their temporary and collective nature.

## Conclusion

The question today is whether subsidized public art – being inherently political, like any art form – can allow itself to be subversive, not only in terms of the message it conveys, as Rochlitz (1994) seems to say, but also in terms of production and diagram, i.e. not only by adopting specific forms or content with the aim of raising controversy, but by truly shifting our relationship to the world and (in the words of Rancière) redefining the lines of distribution of the sensible.

Subversion through ephemerality seems unstable in a context where the latter is but the tatters of the hegemony of cognitive capitalism. Yet, we must recognize the ambiguity that is critiquing a mode of production – and the suffering produced – with the mode itself: it is a difficult to attack ‘flexible capitalism’ using the mode of flexibility<sup>14</sup>. We must undoubtedly distinguish here between the ephemeral and the reversible. None of Gordon Matta-Clark’s cuts are still visible (except on video); nor do any of the buildings exist anymore. His ‘*Splitting*’, as a radical critique of suburban housing, has disappeared. Similarly, artistic conventions never recovered from the assault of ‘ready mades.’ Presumably, the critical potential of ephemerality only functions when it is *irreversible*, in the turmoil of a world it provokes (by eliminating the seriousness and nature of conventions, building new social groups, revealing new subjectivities, etc.).

We feel it is important to keep in mind not so much the fact that art can or cannot be subversive – depending on whether it is commissioned or not – but rather that art’s critical potential is prone to daunting complexification (complexification of the constituent relationships between its modes of production, authors, commissioners and audience). While public art can be subversive, this subversiveness lies not in its content, shape or the sensible methods of production, but in the world it creates. This includes the interference and movement, deterritorialization, the relationship it establishes with the world and the critical distance it allows us to adopt.

This leads us to posit more generally a relative autonomy between modes of production, on one hand, and diagrammatics on the other. A work that has all the finery of subversion can actually contribute to the reproduction of a hegemony, while a work produced according to the canons of traditional can – through the signs and symbols it uses, subjectivities it creates, utopias it instills and conventions it denies - move the lines of force that make the world, notably by influencing the public’s critical thinking, its understanding of space and social relations.

While some authors are able to assert a link between form and content, between ‘the speakable and the visible’ (Rancière, 2000 [2006]), or between technique and political tendency (Benjamin, 1998), it seems that the shift towards cognitive capitalism we mentioned earlier results in a reshuffling of the cards, forcing us to allow for certain considerations regarding the notion of socially-engaged art. While any mode of artistic production can potentially be ‘commandeered’ by the hegemony, the only way for art to be subversive is for it to rely on something else, *e.g.* a shift in perspective, a germinal idea that the world as we perceive it and the common sense that structure it are but political constructions.

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<sup>1</sup> We use the concept of ‘subversion’ to address a broad range of ways an established order is questioned and upset. Explicit critique, working mainly on a symbolic or semantic level is a constitutive part of the subversive power of art. But as it is suggested below, art’s subversiveness comes also from its ability to question the established order on other levels, especially sensitive one..

<sup>2</sup> On this topic, see Hardt and Negri’s critique of Arendt (Hardt & Negri, 2004, p. 102).

<sup>3</sup> For Deleuze and Guattari’s, the world, individuals and groups are made of lines of force. Deleuze defines three types of lines: *molar lines*, which segment the world in rigid binary machines (male-female, child-adult, black-white, etc.); *molecular lines*, which disturb the symmetry created by molar lines and may create new segments that do belong to the binary categories (“*molecular sexuality which is no longer that of a man or a woman, molecular masses which no longer have the outline of class, molecular races like little lines which no longer respond to the great molar opposition*,” Deleuze & Parnet, 1987 [1977], p.131); and *lines of flight*, which are the lines of deterritorialization and destratification: “[they] create an irreversible aspiration to new spaces of liberty” (Guattari, in Sasso & Villani, 2003, p.210).

<sup>4</sup> Johan Stavo-Debaugé, reflecting on the experience of public problems, and notably a “*series of problems that are little considered, even though they are indicated by several expressions of ordinary language*,” proposes an interesting discussion on the French notion of ‘*encaissement*’. This idea ‘*mainly helps to voice the exercise of a certain violence*’ (to take a hit), but also packaging (*i.e.* putting something in a crate and thus containing it in a well-defined place), which can be extended more or less directly to profitability (‘collecting funds’). We do not attempt to translate the French word, as it contains all three, interconnected meanings (Stavo-Debaugé, 2012). In this perspective, culture can be seen as a process wherein the disruptive dimension of art is contained, allowing it to be integrated into various public policies and a profitable market.

<sup>5</sup> The *Arts & Crafts* movement emerged in Britain at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It advocated the infiltration of fine art aesthetics and traditional skills into the production of everyday life objects.

<sup>6</sup> Dada was an European artistic and intellectual movement of the avant-garde. It was established in Zürich (Switzerland) in 1916. Pacifist and anti-bourgeois, the members of Dada often used humor in their works, as well as new techniques of production (such as demonstrations and public gatherings).

<sup>7</sup> For more on this, see also Sharp, Pollock, & Paddison, (2005) and Lacy, (1994) on the origins of grassroots artistic movements that use uncommissioned, temporary artistic interventions in the public space.

<sup>8</sup> From the early 1970’s to his death in 1978, the american artist Gordon Matta-Clark performed several cuts in abandoned buildings that were about to be demolished.

<sup>9</sup> “*The concept of psychic nomadism (or ‘rootless cosmopolitanism’, as we call it in jest) is vital in the creation of the TAZ. Deleuze and Guattari discuss certain aspects of this phenomenon in Nomadology and the War Machine, by Lyotard in Driftworks and by various authors in the “Oasis” issue of the review Semiotext(e). We prefer the term ‘psychic nomadism’ to ‘urban nomadism’, ‘nomadology’, ‘driftwork’, etc., with the simple aim of linking all these concepts into a single, fuzzy group to study in light of the emergence of the TAZ*” (Bey 1997, p. 9).

<sup>10</sup> Heritage collections, regional/municipal contemporary art funds, etc.

<sup>11</sup> In this work, Stanley Broun asks passersby to draw a map to get to a point in the city of their choosing on a piece of paper, which he then attempts to reach based on the drawing.

<sup>12</sup> *Vigilance* was active in Geneva from 1965-1991. It consistently opposed art projects in the public space in the city.

<sup>13</sup> Indeed, a few months after the exhibition a city councillor asked to reconsider the lease between the city and the gallery and to transform the edifice in a café, his demand was notably motivated by the content of the past exhibitions.

<sup>14</sup> For Hardt and Negri: “*What may have been most valuable in the experience of the White Overalls was that they managed to create a form of expression for the new forms of labor – their network organization, their spatial mobility, and temporal flexibility – and organize them as a coherent political force against the new global system of power. Without this indeed there can be no political organization of the proletariat today.*” (Hardt & Negri, 2004, p.267).