

Rosalyn Deutsche: The Question of "Public Space"

I'm very happy to be here and would like to thank Cheryl Younger for inviting me to take part in this seminar. I thought that the most useful contribution I could make would be to offer an—admittedly selective—introduction to the discourse about "public space" and to focus on some of the ways in which this term is currently deployed and with what consequences. Discourse about "public art" is a major site of this deployment. Inevitably, statements about public art are also statements about public space, whether public art is construed as "art in public places," "art that creates public spaces," "art in the public interest," or any other formulation that brings together the words "public" and "art." My critical method in this talk can be traced back to a shift that took place in art criticism in the 1970s. Craig Owens characterized this shift as "a displacement from...a criticism concerned primarily or exclusively with the abstract truth or falsehood of statements, to one which deals with their use in specific social circumstances." This method is "genealogical" in that it makes no attempt to find some essential, unchanging meaning of a concept but, rather, tries to show that meanings are conditional, formed out of struggles. Exploring the ways in which the concept of "public space" has been constituted and used does not preclude supporting a particular use, proposing a different one or taking a position in debates about the meaning of public space. On the contrary, it is precisely the abandonment of the idea that there is a pre-given or proper meaning of public space that necessitates debate. A genealogical approach does mean, however, that in these debates, no one can appeal to an unconditional source of meaning—a supreme judge. We must take seriously the idea that public space is a question, the idea that I think gave rise to this seminar.

Why is public space such a ubiquitous and pressing question today? Why do debates rage over this question? Why do we care? Why, that is, are we here, in this seminar? What political issues are at stake? What are the political functions of rhetoric about public space? How have these changed in recent years?

Over the last decade or so, I have started looking for answers to these questions by noting that nearly all proponents of public space and nearly all advocates of "public" things in general—public parks, public buildings and, most relevant here, public art—present themselves as defenders of democracy. The term "public" has democratic connotations. It implies "openness," "accessibility," "participation," "inclusion" and "accountability" to "the people." Discourse about public art is, then, not only a site of deployment of the term public space but, more broadly, of the term democracy. For example, when arts administrators draft guidelines for putting art in public places, they use a vocabulary that invokes the principles of direct and representative democracy, asking: "Are the artworks for the people? Do they encourage participation? Do they serve their constituencies?" Public art terminology also alludes to a general democratic spirit of egalitarianism: Do the works avoid "elitism?" Are they "accessible?" On the day Richard Serra's "Tilted Arc" was removed from the Federal Plaza in Lower Manhattan, the administrator of the federal government's Art-in-Architecture Program declared that, "This is a day for the city to rejoice because now the plaza returns rightfully to the people." Advocates of public art often seek to resolve confrontations between artists and other users of space

through procedures that are routinely described as "democratic." Examples of such procedures are "community involvement" in the selection of works of art or the so-called "integration" of artworks with the spaces they occupy. Leaving aside the question of the necessity for, and desirability of, these procedures, note that to take for granted that they are democratic is to presume that the task of democracy is to settle, rather than sustain, conflict.

Yet democracy itself is an extremely embattled concept. Indeed, the discourse about public space that has erupted over the last decade in art, architecture, and urban studies is inseparable from a far more extensive eruption of debates about the meaning of "democracy"—debates taking place in many arenas: political philosophy, new social movements, educational theory, legal studies, mass media and popular culture. The term "public space" is one component of a rhetoric of democracy that, in some of its most widespread forms, is used to justify less than democratic policies: the creation of exclusionary urban spaces, state coercion and censorship, surveillance, economic privatization, the repression of differences and attacks on the rights of the most expendable members of society, on the rights of strangers and on the very idea of rights—on what Hannah Arendt called "the right to have rights." The term public frequently serves as an alibi under whose protection authoritarian agendas are pursued and justified. The term, that is, is playing a starring role in what Stuart Hall, in another context, called "authoritarian populism," by which he meant the mobilization of democratic discourses to sanction, indeed to pioneer, shifts toward state coercion. Adapting Hall's concept, we might say that the term public has become part of the rhetoric of conservative democracy, which may well be the most pertinent political problem of our time. By "conservative democracy," I mean the use of democratic concepts such as "liberty," "equality," "individual freedom," "activism" and "participation" for specifically right-wing ends. Public space is another democratic concept, one that is central to discourse about cities, where it is used to support a cruel and unreasonable urbanism.

I have been interested in public art discourse not because I seek a type of art that is located in some universally accessible site but because the discourse about public art is itself a political site—a site, that is, of contests over the meaning of democracy and, importantly, the meaning of the political. I cannot stress this second point strongly enough and I will return to it. It is repeatedly claimed that public art, by contrast with non-public art, is "political." But is not the category of the political itself politically constituted? Avoiding the question of this constitution—treating the category as self-evident—turns "the political" into a tool for forcing certain social issues, social groups, and types of art into the realm of the politically irrelevant. Even worse, unexamined notions of the political can lead to the notion that certain issues, groups and artworks divert attention from political issues and are therefore complicit with power and politically dangerous. This, I fear, is one result of the leftist discourse about public art, which has become a site of the deployment of the adjective political.

In this regard, it seems to me that the problems with discourse about public art have changed since the 1980s, when I first wrote about it. In that decade, talk about public

space and public art intensified. The context of this acceleration was massive urban redevelopment. Redevelopment and its residential component, gentrification, formed part of a global spatial restructuring that facilitated new capitalist relations of oppression and exploitation and transformed cities in the interest of private profit and state control. Redevelopment helped destroy the conditions of survival—housing and services—for residents no longer needed in the city's economy, and its most visible symptom was the emergence of a large population of homeless residents. Nonetheless, art that took part in designing redeveloped spaces, or which served some practical or beautifying function within those spaces, was touted as serving the essential needs of a unified society. It was presupposed that the concepts of "beauty" and "utility" lie beyond politics. I argued, however, that precisely because it was shielded by the alibis of beauty and function, the dominant type of public art—what was then called "the new public art"—actually performed a political function: it conferred democratic legitimacy on redevelopment and helping to suppress the social conflicts, the relations of oppression, that were actually producing new urban spaces. The new public art engaged in and concealed what Marxist geographers called "the politics of space"—a phrase that refers not only to the struggles taking place inside spaces but, more importantly, to the struggles that produce and maintain those spaces.

Artists and critics who were dissatisfied with public art's legitimating role and committed to art as a critical social practice tried to unmask the politics of conservative definitions of public space and to redefine public art. Some people, myself included, found a valuable resource in the concept of "the public sphere," a historical category first analyzed by Jürgen Habermas as a set of institutions in which private citizens gather to formulate public opinion that may be critical of the state. A public, then, differs from an audience. It is formed when citizens engage in political discussion. Of course, the meaning of the public sphere itself has been the object of intense debate, spawning a lengthy and important bibliography. But without going into this debate, we can note that the category of the public sphere was useful to art discourse because it replaced the idea of public space as that which lies outside, and must be protected from, politics with the idea of public space as the realm of politics. Introducing the concept into art criticism, people redefined public art as art that enters or helps create such a political space. This redefinition shatters mainstream categorization of public art for, within its terms, public art is no longer conceived as work that occupies or designs physical spaces and addresses preexisting audiences; public art is an instrument that constitutes a public by engaging people in political discussion or by entering a political struggle. Any site has the potential to be transformed into a public space. And with the introduction of the concept of the public sphere, the admonition to make art public became a demand for art's politicization.

It is important, then, to recognize that since the 1980s, discourse about public art has changed. Yet it seems to me that it has only partially changed. For if discourse about public art once tended to gloss over the question of public space, today it simultaneously acknowledges and disavows the fact that public space is a question. The model for this kind of thinking is the fetishistic disavowal of sexual difference. The little boy looks at the woman, recognizes that she doesn't have a penis but acts as though she does

anyway—by, as Freud writes, setting up a substitute which becomes an object of his devotion. The woman's difference cannot be recognized because it is "perceived" not simply as difference but as "castration" and therefore as a threat. But the perception that woman is incomplete is possible only against the background of a belief that there is a state of wholeness or completion, which is signified by the penis and can be lost. The structure of fetishism is: I know there is difference in the world, but I'll act as if there is not. Desire achieves representation through the repression of difference. The real world, traded for an imaginary one in which difference doesn't exist, is impoverished.

Something similar can be detected in many discussions of public art that define public art as political and/or social. Frequently, participants in these discussions state that we are not sure what public art or public space is. At the same time, they act as though we are sure. Articles, conferences, journals and lectures begin by announcing that we don't know what it means for art to be public. Still, they refer to certain traits as the *sine qua non*s, the essential qualities, of public art. The most common example is the way in which it is taken for granted that to qualify as public—that is, political—art must be located in spaces outside of museums or galleries. "Outside the museum" is considered the necessary, if not sufficient, condition of art's publicness. There, it is assumed, we find or at least hope to achieve a public space understood as a realm of universal accessibility, that is, of wholeness and plenitude. "Inside the museum," one falls into partiality and therefore into privacy. The vehicle of the disavowal, the tool that generates the rigid inside/outside or public/private division, is an unexamined notion of the political as a realm of unified struggle, a notion that might be called phallogentric in its orientation toward completion. Why use the term public to uphold rather than problematize the public/private division? Why use it to restrict, rather than proliferate, political spaces? Why use it to support the fiction that the museum is isolated from society? Are these uses politically productive?

Because I think that the answer to this final question is "no," I am neither devoted to nor an expert on public art, at least as the term is conventionally defined. It is true that my critical writing has developed in dialogue with artworks that are categorized as "public"—Krzysztof Wodiczko's slide projections on buildings and statues, for example. I do not, however, honor any strict opposition between this work and works such as, say, Hans Haacke's "MoMA Poll" of 1970 or Barbara Kruger's photomontages of the early 1980s, works that in my opinion question the closure of the museum and gallery spaces they occupy, bring out the social struggles taking place in these apparently neutral spaces and, thus, "make" a public space, just as Wodiczko's does. All these practices rest on the assumption that public space, far from a pre-given entity created for users, is, rather, a space that only emerges from practices by users. As Vito Acconci puts it, public art either makes or breaks a public space. In my view, the crucial issue is not whether but how an artist enters a space.

"Public space" in this view does not simply refer to already existing, physical urban sites such as parks, urban squares, streets or cities as a whole. Of course, parks, squares and other elements of the built environment can be public spaces. But they are not self-evidently public nor are they the only public spaces. The concept of the public sphere

makes it clear that public space cannot be reduced to empirically identifiable spaces. Public space can also be defined as a set of institutions where citizens—and, given the unprecedented mixing of foreigners in today's international cities, hopefully noncitizens—engage in debate; as the space where rights are declared, thereby limiting power; or as the space where social group identities and the identity of society are both constituted and questioned.

In part, public art discourse has treated public space in a restrictive manner because it has tended to neglect the term "space." Other keywords of public art discourse, such as "art," "public," "the city," "urbanism," "the urban" have been problematized, at least to the extent that it is routinely noted that they are in need of definition and subject to historical variation. Space, however, is largely ignored, as though it is obvious in its clarity. It is presupposed to be a purely physical entity or it is defined as social insofar as it is a container of social processes or the material expression of socioeconomic relationships. In both cases, space is seen as a purely objective field that is independent of any discursive intervention. The object of the discourse—space—is simply accepted as "real." Indeed, one is accused of abandoning "reality" if one takes seriously the idea that space itself is a social relationship in the sense that it is discursively constituted or if one treats discourse as a space and interrogates the space of the discourse about space, if, that is, one asks: What are the foundations of the discourse? What are its boundaries? How are they constituted? By and for whom? One is accused of trading in "unreality." The real/unreal division also leads to the belief, held by many spatial theorists today, that we must defend traditional, so-called "real" spaces—urban squares and streets, for instance—against new spatial arrangements—cyberspace, mass media, shopping malls—which are dismissed as "unreal." This dismissal, like the dismissal of the museum as a public forum, is, I think, politically counterproductive, since it prevents us from paying attention to the real political struggles that produce all spaces and thus keeps us from extending the field of spatial politics.

I am, however, getting ahead of myself. "Space," I've said, is the neglected term of public art discourse, the one crying out for attention. I'd like to enlarge our thinking about space and, ultimately, public space with the help of a definition of space given by Martin Heidegger in his 1954 essay, "Building Dwelling Thinking." Heidegger writes: "A space is something that has been made room for, something that is cleared and free, namely within a boundary.... A boundary is not that at which something stops but...that from which something begins its presencing."

Space, in the sense of "something that has been made room for" can of course be a city, building or park, but it can also be, say, a category, a theory, an identity, a discipline, a work of art or a conference...this conference. Heidegger's definition stresses the constructed nature of space. Space is not a given entity; it is "made room for." The boundaries that enclose a space are not generated by a pre-given ground. They are not the natural limits of an interior whose identity derives from an internal property or presence. Rather, space is the effect of marking off boundaries, which generate the sense of an interior, are inseparable from the interior.

This conception of space problematizes any strict opposition between physical social spaces, on the one hand, and discourse or representation, on the other. A space is discursively constituted and discourse is a space. Space is not an entity but a relationship. And if a space is something that has been made room for, "namely within a boundary," then in laying down the boundaries that mark off a space something is cast outside. Thus, the architecture historian, Mark Wigley, claims that "there is no space without violence and no violence that is not spatial." This means that space is political since it is constructed through the force of exclusion. But it also means that, in a certain way, space is fragile. For the perception of a coherent, closed space cannot be separated from a sense of what threatens that space—of what it tries to exclude but cannot because the exclusion is constitutive.

Paying attention to the boundaries and exclusions which produce spaces can help us chip away at some of the most calcified ideas about what it means to attach the adjective "public" to the word "space." "Public space" is commonly assumed to be a space which is, precisely, non-exclusionary—which is fully inclusive or at least potentially fully inclusive, all embracing, and universally accessible. But if boundaries constitute space, then public space only has meaning in relation to something that is excluded—a space excluded as private. No matter how much it is touted as inclusionary, public space is, as the political philosopher Nancy Fraser writes about the public sphere, "a strategy of distinction." Indeed, the invocation of "public space" is a powerful tool for dismissing certain issues, ideas and social groups by relegating them to the realm of the merely private. This exclusion is one of the term's principal functions. So, those of us who are committed to nurturing a democratic public space are faced with the problem of dealing with exclusions in a way that is compatible with democratic values. I'll return to this problem. For now, I will simply suggest that treating exclusions as though they are dictated by nature or reality itself or by the essential needs of a society is incompatible with democratic values since it renders exclusions invisible and makes them unavailable for questioning. To be democratic, we must acknowledge what exists.

So here I am enclosing the term "public space" in quotation marks. This is not to say that public space doesn't exist or to cast doubt on the importance of the concept. Rather, I want to denaturalize it. The purpose of the quotation marks is to designate that the term "public space" is a site of contest, which is to say, fully political.

The remarks I've made so far are not abstract, theoretical considerations that can be detached from so-called "real" political struggles over so-called "real" public spaces. These considerations cannot be discarded as mere discourse divorced from concrete or material reality. After all, any struggle over the use of some empirically observable public space—let us say, an urban square or park—is a struggle between the competing meanings assigned to the space, between, that is, competing representations of public space. This, by itself, dispenses with any easy divisions between real and unreal, material and discursive space.

Of course, the most shopworn, if still effective, strategy in urban spatial contests is to act as though the meaning of public space is self-evident and, in this way, to seal off that

space from political debate. Here is a concrete example, which I discuss in my book, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics*. About seven years ago, a little park not too far from where we're sitting—Jackson Park in the West Village—was renovated by the city government. As part of the renovation, new gates were installed. Following the renovation, a neighborhood group formed, calling itself the "Friends of Jackson Park." "Friends of Jackson Park" assumed responsibility for locking the park gates each night to prevent homeless people from sleeping there. The local state, acting through its Parks Department, willingly accepted the group's help since the department itself did not have sufficient personnel to close the park.

Without taking a position on the nighttime closing of the park, I want to comment on the strategies that were used to legitimate the neighborhood's plan. These strategies are based on certain assumptions that currently dominate discourse about the problems of public spaces in U.S. cities, and the Jackson Park incident can bring out the elements of this discourse. In 1991, an article about Jackson Park appeared in the "Metro Matters" column of the *New York Times*. The *Times* reported that the City Parks Department welcomed what it called "public" help in "protecting public space." This simple, apparently neutral sentence contains several interrelated preconceptions. The first of these is that "the public" consists of the housed residents of a neighborhood. "Friends of Jackson Park" are the public and public space exists for and is controlled by these residents. Neighborhood space is repeatedly mistaken for public space; the community for the public. Second, protecting public space is equated with evicting homeless people. And the third assumption follows from the second: people without homes are not residents of the neighborhood and are therefore not part of the public. Rather, homeless people are intruders in public space—this is the final and most problematic assumption of all.

In addition, the *Times* maintains that the "Friends of Jackson Park" are "determined to keep a park a park," a question-begging statement if ever there was one. The very question at the heart of the Jackson Park incident—by whom and for what purposes a public park is to be used—is decided in advance, presented as an unassailable matter of common sense, apart from any social and historical contingencies, such as the broader uses of urban space. During the heyday of redevelopment in the 1980s, Mayor Koch used the same strategy to argue against the presence of homeless people in Grand Central Terminal. Reason, he said, dictates that a train station is for transportation. In those days, of course, it was still necessary to make an argument for evicting homeless people from the city.

The very blatant example of Jackson Park can help us tease out the steps by which the democratic concept of "public space" is mobilized in an authoritarian direction. The first step is to endow the space with an objective source of meaning that dictates its function—"a park is a park." The second step is to claim that this source authorizes the exercise of power by the guardian of public space—city government. Implicit in this claim is the idea that the guardians of public space, those who exercise power there, are ensuring that the park is used by its proper owners in accordance with its proper identity. Ultimately, the claim is that public space has an incontestable meaning from which power derives its legitimacy. And the certainty that power has an external guarantee, lying

outside politics, is the hallmark of what many consider a distinctly undemocratic power and a distinctly authoritarian discourse about public space. Let me be clear: This does not mean that exercising power or making decisions about the uses of space are in themselves undemocratic, only that appealing to a transcendent basis of decisions is. Indeed, such appeals conceal the fact that decisions are made, suggesting instead that answers to social questions are given in advance of political struggle.

Conservative democracy, operating through appeals to common sense, reason and the essential interests of "the people," threatens urban centers throughout the U.S., nowhere more so than in New York, the city in which we're meeting. In New York, this threat is currently embodied in the term "the quality of life," which, as I am sure you know, dominates discussion about cities and legitimates urban policy decisions. The term is the centerpiece of a protectionist discourse which has become so widely accepted that campaigns to improve the quality of life are equated with the preservation of public space and, what is more, with the survival of urbanism itself. Actually, the reverse is closer to the truth. Prevailing ideas about the quality of life are informed by an animus against rights and equality and a hostility toward strangers. It, therefore, endangers democratic urbanism—where urbanism refers, in a broad political sense, not simply to the way of life of those in urban areas but to our manner of living together, with others, in the city. Quality-of-life talk goes hand in hand with moral crusades, which are guided by the precept that today's urban problems spring from a decline in adherence to conventional moral values. It also goes hand in hand with an ideology of "neighborhood," which, as Michael Warner contends, defines urban space as a community of shared interest based on residence and property. Indeed, we have seen that in the name of "neighborhood," people without homes are evicted from parks and, today, removed to undisclosed locations. Also, in the name of neighborhood, sex businesses are threatened with near extinction, businesses that have been the condition of gay public life, where gays have constructed a shared world. In the name of neighborhood, then, homeless people and gay men are left, to borrow a phrase from Michel de Certeau, with no "expectations of space." In current circumstances, there is reason to believe that the discourse of neighborhood jeopardizes urban life, if by this we mean the interaction of heterogeneous people from widely scattered locations. There is even reason to suspect that, in the context of today's moral crusades, the discourse of neighborhood has become unneighborly. Moral crusaders presuppose the existence of an absolute ground of the norms they seek to enforce. They portray those who deviate from these norms as representatives of society's "outside." They then support punitive measures against these outsiders, disregarding the possibility that, as Oscar Wilde, a lover of cities and one of moralism's saddest victims, said, "the habitual employment of punishment brutalizes a community at least as much as the occurrence of crime."

We are meeting, I think, in a brutalized city. What, in contrast, might an ethical and democratic urbanism mean? To help us search for an answer, I asked the members of this seminar to read two essays by Claude Lefort, a French political philosopher who in the early 1980s framed ideas that have since become key points in discussions about radical democracy and public space. Lefort proposes that the hallmark of democracy is the disappearance of certainty about the foundations of social life. Uncertainty, he says,

makes democratic power the antithesis of the absolutist monarchical power it destroys. In Lefort's view, the French bourgeois political revolutions of the eighteenth century inaugurated a radical mutation in the form of society, a mutation he calls "the democratic invention." The democratic invention was one and the same event with the Declaration of the Rights of Man, an event that shifted the location of power. The declaration states that all sovereign power resides within "the people." Previously, it had lived elsewhere. Under the monarchy, power was embodied in the person of the king who in turn embodied the power of the state. But the power possessed by king and state ultimately derived from a transcendent source—God, Supreme Justice, Reason. And the transcendent source that guaranteed the king's and the state's power also guaranteed the meaning and unity of society—of, that is, the people. Society was represented as a substantial unity whose hierarchical organization rested upon an absolute basis.

With the democratic revolution, state power was no longer referred to an external source. Now it derived from "the people" and was located inside the social. But when references to an outside source of unity disappeared, an unconditional origin of social unity also vanished. The people are the source of power but they, too, are deprived in the democratic moment of their substantial identity. The social order, like the state, has no pre-given basis. Rather, it is "purely social" and therefore an enigma, an unsolved problem. Power is linked in the democratic moment to what Lefort calls "the image of an empty place." "In my view," he writes, the important point is that democracy is instituted and sustained by the dissolution of the markers of certainty. It inaugurates a history in which people experience a fundamental indeterminacy as to the basis of power, law and knowledge, and as to the basis of relations between self and other."

Democracy, then, has a difficulty at its core. Power stems from the people but belongs to nobody. Democracy abolishes the external referent of power and refers power to society. But democratic power cannot appeal for its authority to a meaning that is immanent in the society. Instead, the democratic revolution invents what Lefort calls "the public space." Lefort's public space is the social space where, in the absence of a foundation, the meaning and unity of the society is negotiated, constituted and put at risk. What is recognized in public space is the legitimacy of contest about what is legitimate and what is illegitimate. Contest is initiated with the declaration of rights, which themselves are deprived of an unconditional source. Although rights are declared in the name of nature, the democratic invention actually relocates rights from a transcendent to a political realm. The essence of rights is to be declared. This means that, whether or not they are made in the name of nature, they are coextensive with, not prior to, politics. Etienne Balibar defines human rights as the "universal right to politics," equal freedom to engage in political struggle.

Democracy and democratic public space appear when the idea that society is unified by a substantial basis is abandoned. The social order and our common humanity become an enigma and are therefore open to contestation. Of course, social questions are settled—this point is frequently misunderstood. But no question can be forever excluded from politics. Nor can the problem of society itself ever be finally settled. To be democratic, society and public space must remain a question. For Lefort, public space, the question at

democracy's heart, implies an institutionalization of conflict as, through a limitless declaration of rights, the exercise of power is questioned. Like Henri Lefebvre, who invented the notion of "the right to the city," Lefort entangles public space with rights. He makes the two inseparable and this challenges the ease with which those who, traveling under the slogan of an improved "quality of life," express hostility toward rights yet present themselves as guardians of urban public space.

With Lefort's conception of democratic public space, we can again take up the discussion of the quality of life and then return to Jackson Park. First, at the risk of stating the obvious, I will make a few observations about "the quality of life." The phrase is formulated in the singular. It thus seems to refer to the quality of everyone's life and has an egalitarian ring. In fact, "the quality of life" could be, indeed has been deployed in arguments for equal opportunity. The argument for equal opportunity rests upon the claim that each individual ought to be able to exercise the capacity to make certain choices and in order to do so, he or she must have equal access to social resources such as education, health and material stability. Framed in this way, the struggle for a better quality of life could be a struggle for a more equitable distribution of social resources. This is the way the term functioned in the "social indicator" movement during the 1960s. Social indicator discourse used the term "quality of life" to designate the state of a society's health. A "well society" treats all people with equal dignity. All have equal rights, access to resources, the opportunity to voice opinions and sufficient income to meet their needs. Geographers in the social indicator movement measured spatial trends in the quality of life in order to point out disparities, mobilizing the notion of "the quality of life" to support struggles for equality and rights.

Now the term is mobilized against these struggles. Instead of connoting equality, the singularity of the phrase is a formula for exclusion. It implies the existence of an abstract, universal city dweller—a citizen that transcends class, race, gender and sexuality, is untouched by history, and is the occupant of public space. Today's quality of life discourse is not universalist in the sense of proposing equality for all people. It is universalist in the sense of positing a human essence that encompasses all people in a single whole and in this way neutralizes their differences and erases concrete inequalities.

Here is an example: In 1992, a magazine called the City Journal devoted a special issue to "The Quality of Urban Life." Published by the Manhattan Institute, a conservative think tank located in New York, City Journal is the voice of conservative urban policy intellectuals. In 1992, it was edited by Roger Starr, formerly the city's housing and development administrator, in which capacity he advocated what he called "planned shrinkage." The plan, put forth in 1976, was that residents no longer needed in NY's corporate-oriented economy would be "resettled" to encourage the abandonment of deteriorated neighborhoods. City services would be withdrawn from these areas, and, in Starr's words, "public investment hoarded for those areas where it will sustain life." Sixteen years later, Starr began his editorial in "The Quality of Life" issue of City Journal with the following paragraph: Cities should be comfortable places. In an uncomfortable city...people expect bad things to happen: to find trash deposited on the sidewalk in front of their homes, to be subjected to the verbal assault of an aggressive beggar or the

physical assault of a mugger, to discover that their car stereo has been stolen, to face constant reminders of poverty and depression.

Despite the universalizing pretensions of the quality-of-life discourse, Starr is clearly addressing very particular residents. They are, for instance, not themselves poor, since then they would face constant reminders of poverty. This is a simple example of the way in which quality-of-life discourse, far from describing an already-existing, uniform, all-inclusive public actually constitutes a public by excluding certain social groups. Of course this is true of any discourse about public space. The authoritarian ruse in this discourse is the way in which it erases the traces of its exclusions—shields them from debate—by referring to a singular quality of urban life, a reference that supports an image of public space as the space where society is One.

I will conclude by returning to Jackson Park to suggest that attempts to defend this unitary image of public space can have terrible consequences. City Journal's "Quality of Urban Life" issue contains an article by Fred Siegel titled "Reclaiming Our Public Spaces." Siegel, like the author of the NY Times piece quoted earlier, uses Jackson Park as an example of a victory for public space. He, too, equates the protection of public space with the eviction of homeless people. There is, however a difference between the two: Siegel seems to acknowledge the inevitability of conflicts over the meaning of public spaces. "What the homeless crisis has made unavoidable," he writes, "is the clash of values created around contested spaces. The problems of public space and the homeless have become inextricably intertwined." Nonetheless, Siegel does avoid conflict by representing the decision to lock Jackson Park as a "reclamation" of "our" public space from "undesirables." In short, the clash of values around a contested space—Jackson Park—is a war between two forces: On one side, are the "Friends of Jackson Park," who are conflated with "the public" and who, backed by the local state, hold the proper values and represent the proper uses that will restore the original coherence of public space. On the other side, stand the park's enemies—people without homes who disrupt harmony.

In Siegel's scenario, the very recognition of conflict supports the fantasy that public space might be free of conflict. Siegel constructs the homeless person as what Slavoj Žižek calls an ideological figure. Disorder, unrest and antagonism in the social order are attributed to this figure. These qualities cannot be eliminated from the social order since, as Lefort argues, society has no pre-given, unifying ground. But the image of public space as the realm where society is One transforms "the homeless person" into an intruder who disrupts space from the outside. Presented as an ideological figure, "the homeless person" becomes a representative of society's outside, the bringer of conflict, whose elimination will restore social coherence. Hence, the temptations to violence in idealized images of public space.

A final note: it seems that in the course of this talk I have traveled far from the subject of public art. Indeed, I have tried to distance myself from the category, insofar as it is defined as the privileged space of real aesthetic politics by casting other art practices into privacy and unreality—insofar, that is, as it takes shape at the expense of others. I do,

however, fully support the efforts of artists and critics to use visual objects—including the things of the city, such as statues, monuments, parks, and buildings—to help create public space, to, for instance, allow the homeless person to emerge from her consignment to an ideological image and declare her right to the city, which is to say, her right to politics. More broadly, I fully support the deployment, or re-deployment, of visual objects to, as Acconci writes, "break" spaces that have been ordained as public or "make" public spaces in which the foundations of social unity and of power can be questioned. The reservations I have expressed about current uses of the term "public art" spring from my belief that it is important to proliferate public spaces, to join struggles to make many different kinds of spaces public, to displace the boundary between the public and the private, and, in so doing, to enlarge, rather than limit, the space of politics.

Analysis by George Kimmerling

Rosalyn Deutsche's theoretical framework for considering public space eradicates public art's traditional ties to site and object, thus challenging public-art practitioners and viewers to rethink such work in the context of social function and effect.

For Deutsche, discussions of public art beg the question of public space, a query one can engage only within the context of democracy. Public art initiates struggle, displaces boundaries and enlarges the contested space of politics, Deutsche says. Moreover, public art practice is itself a site for advancing or constraining democracy, as all public art, in each specific representation, either enters into or creates public space in which citizens can debate how they should live together and how they can declare their rights as a limit on authoritarian power.

As Deutsche argues, the notion that public art must be located outside museums and galleries supports the fiction that these institutional spaces are not already politically constructed and contested, and that art located at other sites is less mediated. All art is mediated, she says, and art practices, such as those in which Hans Haacke or Barbara Krueger at times engage in museums and galleries, can foster democratic debate, which, for Deutsche, is the necessary component of public art.

But how far can we remove public art from its traditional outdoor public space and still have it qualify as public? If the entering into or creation of public debate is the essential quality of public art, can public art exist in the private home or collection, a space in which perhaps only a few invited guests or friends of the arts patron may view the work? Couldn't some works, even in this context, stir vociferous debate about rights and responsibilities, or about the boundaries of private space?

Other kinds of work that Deutsche's framework might bracket as public include body works, such as the facial reconstruction of Orlan, tattoos, piercings and other markings, which participate in the debate over bodies as commodity, property or territory. Could "public art" also now include work that few have seen but many are discussing, or purely conceptual art in which the object is all but dematerialized and only the barest description of the idea for the object exists?

Rather than the site or object, perhaps it is the work's content that is essential in creating democratic debate. All political art, then, may be public art. If so, then all art may be public art, since the meaning and reception of all work is socially constructed—an idea Deutsche equates with "political."

What then is left as the meaning of "public" art? It seems, for Deutsche, the qualifying mark of public art is not its site or its existence as object, but its effect. Wherever it is sited and of whatever material it is made (if indeed it is made), the work must support rather than suppress democratic debate over boundaries, both physical and intangible.

But I am left wondering who will participate in the debate and who must participate if the debate is to be democratic. It seems that the debate should allow for equal participation across lines of class, race, gender and sex practice. Can museum and gallery work invite that broad a dialogue? Is it enough to engender debate at MoMA or a Chelsea gallery or between collectors and their guests? Can purely conceptual art effect public space if only art cognoscenti are aware of and understand the work?

Perhaps, as Deutsche's own approach to inquiry suggests, these questions cannot be answered with appeals to or assurances of absolute truth or falsity, but only within the specific instances where claims of public art are made. The issue of who must participate in assessing those claims, then, can be settled only within the specificity of the space the art engages. Deutsche's new function-based framework for public art leaves large, unanswered questions. But perhaps that's precisely the right effect for a theory based on the notion that democracy sustains conflict, not consensus.

Rosalyn Deutsche responds:

Thank you for the thoughtful response to my talk. Mr. Kimmerling raises good questions. I would just like to add that my aim was not to offer a definition of the term "public art" that is grounded in function, but rather to question the political-frequently undemocratic-functions of contemporary deployments of the term. I also suggested a way of dealing with the concept of public space that is based not on location but on the performance of an operation.