

“Where democracy occurs does matter in *how* democracy occurs.”¹

ART, DIALOGUE, COMMUNITY, ACTION.

These are large, messy words. But despite their ambiguities, when they intersect and interact, flames of power ignite. This power is what public art desires: to connect people—in words and in action—to something larger than themselves. This is the transformative power of art in the public realm, when individuals, despite societal divisions, connect and assert voice through art.

In these moments, we are seduced into thinking that all public art catalyzes social interaction and discourse. But these moments materialize through an often quiet and slow process: meetings gathering disparate groups and individuals; facilitated discussions; and many phone calls and emails. This back-of-the-house work—marshalling people, resources, and details—may appear unrelated to art, but engaging with the public, especially since the public is not a fixed entity, is an art. While it is understood that no one artwork stands for “art,” and no one conversation defines “dialogue,” “public” is often perceived as a monolithic entity. But “the public” is a vast array of people with multivalent voices and needs, often in conflict. Gathering together and responding to this polyphony of voices throughout the city is the enduring power and vision of Indira Johnson’s public art project Ten Thousand Ripples.

ROLE OF PUBLIC ART IN THE COMMUNAL SPACE

Art in the public realm historically presented manifestations of solidified power with sculptures commemorating historical leaders or events. In Chicago in 1967, the Picasso sculpture forever changed this. I posit that 10,000 Ripples is part of a further evolution of public art, concerned less with objects and more with a reinvisioning of the commons and the people within it. Since the 1960s, sculpture has shifted from the object itself as the work of art to the spatial experience and the experience of the audience that the work provokes. As Douglas Crimp has written “The viewer, in effect, is the subject of the work.” We can see this shift in thinking about the public realm in various arenas from Hannah Arendt’s ideas of civic engagement, through Joseph Beuys’s social sculpture, to Habermas’s social dimension of public space, or the public sphere where discourse occurs. Including Jane Jacobs’s and William Whyte’s ideas of designing public spaces for socializing and Ray Oldenburg’s “third place” where conversation and social exchange is at the forefront, discussions surrounding public art need to go beyond what will be placed where.

We need to ask: where and what (and even when) is communal space? Who makes these often political decisions about spaces and why? How can art open up the process of civic engagement and forge inclusive alliances to make decisions about public space or the commons? How can artistic placemaking include quality of life discussions?

While the dissemination of Buddha in public space around the city is ostensibly Johnson’s artwork, I posit that the work is actually the dissemination of the relational process of civic dialogue surrounding public space. To begin Ripples, Johnson initiated “a call and response” within communities. The call—to engage in a collaborative community-driven activation of public voice—was triangulated across the city with multiple neighborhood partnerships each answering in their own voice. This “call and response” eventually evolved into each participating community using the Buddhas to address their disparate needs such as Albany Park creating safety and conflict resolution discussions, Back of the Yards using the Buddhas to create a neutral zone, and North Lawndale transforming vacant lots into peace parks.

By seeking out an active citizenry in each neighborhood and by being responsive to their concerns and needs, Johnson allowed the art to reflect the communities’ complexities and to foster divergent relationships to the work. The Buddha became less of an object within public space, a facilitator of a process of opening up dialogue and decision-making. This important distinction, which is not unique to all public art projects, reflects a significant shift in thinking and acting. Johnson not only relinquished her control of the work’s placement but its definitive interpretation. By allowing the Buddha to serve a multiplicity of intents, purposes, and social needs, its meaning became dialogic and relational. The context, or social situation of the communities, was allowed to constitute the meaning and purpose of the work and how public space and the people within it could be activated.

This open process relocates the decision-making arena surrounding public space from capital, state, or city to local inhabitants. Public art, as an extension of public voice, can inspire citizens to exercise their right to not only produce and determine full usage of urban space but to articulate communal needs, hopes, and desires.

¹ Richard Sennet “The New Political Economy and its Culture,” *The Hedgehog Review* 2, no. 1, Spring, 2000, 69. <http://www.iasc-culture.org/THR/archives/Democracy/2.1FSennett.pdf>