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What do Images in the Public Space do?

Introduction

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Full text

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Visuality and Visual Studies

- 1 The question “What do images in the public space do?” refers to W. J. T. Mitchell’s book *What do pictures want?* published in 2005 and recently translated into French. This question reflects several issues related to the development of visual studies as an interdisciplinary field of study. The analysis of images, which was traditionally attached to art history, is now investigated by visual studies, which have shifted the line of questioning to reflect upon the notion of “visuality” that Norman Bryson defines as “*the social construct of vision*”, thus moving away from the myth “*of pure form, pure perception and culturally universal vision*” (Bryson 1088- 108). Based on the

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pictures and their audience. The encounter that occurs forms a sphere of dialogue, conflict and resistance, which leads to a redefinition of both the status of images and the role of the spectator. For this issue, we have decided to define the notion of images as visual and figurative representations embodied in pictures through material support.

Theories of Performativity

- 2 Many authors have investigated the encounter between images and their audiences in terms of *agency* and, more recently, in terms of *performativity*, which has received a great deal of attention in the last two decades. A look back to the theories of performativity requires expanding on the notion of *agency* that Alfred Gell has applied to images and objects (Gell 1998). He considered them “*a form of instrumental action*” because they can influence thoughts and actions within the social sphere (*Ibid*: 20). Additional anthropological conceptions of images can be found in authors such as Horst Bredekamp, who defines the “image act” (*Bildakt*) as the power “*by which the latent capacity of the image may be stirred into impacting upon the feelings, thoughts and motivation of engaged observers*” (Bredekamp 2018: 35). The event can only occur relationally because people attribute to the images the power to heal, to frighten or to work miracles (Freedberg 1989). Many studies have thus developed the notion of performativity over the last fifteen years based on pictures that stare back, challenge, or even discuss with their viewer (Ginzburg 2001, Mitchell 2003). The latter highlights the role of historical factors (race, class, and gender) in shaping our collective relationship to images that assigned them a subaltern position within Western societies (Mitchell 2005: 29). Not every picture is therefore intrinsically or universally performative; its effectiveness can only be understood within a given society and period. Based on both urban and visual studies, this journal issue aims to address the concept of performativity in terms of spatial dimensions. The impact of images does not lie only in the memory or desire we attribute to them, which can be the product of a historical balance of power. The emphasis on spatial dimensions echoes the recent development of geography of art as a field study that has developed a reflection on how art makes sense not only in, but also with space (Volvey 2007). In other words, “*the spatial context in which images are set is essential to capture not only their degree of visibility but also their ability to resonate with the place in which they are located, to take on or to lose their meaning in relation to it*” (Guinard 2017).

Images as the Subject of Geographical Research

- 3 Following geographers such as Gillian Rose and Antje Schlottmann, it now appears important to think about the interrelationship of visibility and spatiality to open up the line of questioning to the “*constitution of space through material images*” and “*[the role of] images for everyday use or advertising in the structuring of external spaces*” (Schlottmann 2017: 2). Social sciences investigate “*visual practices of appropriating (spatial) reality*” because they translate “*established ways of looking at the world – by society, cultural and social groups, or disciplines*” (*Ibid*: 1). Researchers have therefore focussed on the visual dimension of space, using methods from various fields of study,

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further in this issue dedicated to the performativity of images. In comparison, we have, however, chosen to broaden the scope of our study to encompass not only artistic but also all other types of images, as long as they are in the public space.

- *Sur les murs de la ville*, published in the journal *Urbanités* (n° 9), notes a blind spot in urban studies – the pictures that cover the walls of the city. Their number, in an urban environment already saturated with signs, has paradoxically made of them the neglected objects of urban theories. However, as Gordon Fyfe and John Law have said, pictures are “*the site for the construction and depiction of social difference*” (Fyfe and Law 1988: 1). The publication thus focusses on graffiti as territorial markers for gangs, on propaganda posters organized and regulated by public authorities and social elites, and on street art as a new form of urban marketing. In this issue, we consider other forms of images in the public space that are part of older traditions, for instance commemorative, such as memorials or statues, to understand how the performativity of image changes over time and space.

Rethinking Materiality and Spatiality

- 4 The performativity of images is to be considered in relation to their spatiality that gives them a public status, through which images are made into pictures to be shared and looked at by many people. We can therefore think about the effects produced by the pictures once exhibited in a public space. Can the exhibition in a place everyone can access be sufficient to make these images public? How do images materialize themselves in space and through which media and locations? When analysing photographs (but we could extend the following observation to other media), Elisabeth Edwards makes a distinction between pictures from personal or collective contexts – “*Images read as ‘private’ are those read in a context contiguous with the ‘life’ from which they are extracted; meaning and memory stay with them, as in family photographs, for example. ‘Public’ photographs remove the image entirely from such a context, and meaning becomes free-floating, externally generated and read in terms of symbol and metaphor*” (Edwards 2001: 9). The last sentence notes one of the major issues when working with public space; pictures are addressed to everyone and no one in particular. Who then can generate the meaning of these pictures? Moreover, who has or does not have the right to interpret them? In this respect, the common interrogation on both visuality and spatiality take on its importance. The investigation of the performativity of images begins with or includes their coming into being through space, i.e., their spatial materiality. This issue thus excludes digitalized images that come from the media sphere and social networks to focus instead on public space as a physical and material entity.

Public, Public Space and Publicness

- 5 Long considered in terms of legal status, the contributions of cultural geography and political philosophy have helped to rethink the analysis of public spaces. The reassessment of the term “public” has opened up the questions on the polysemy of the spaces thus qualified. As Don Mitchell notes, the multiple definitions of the term are always the product of conflicts and power relationships (Don Mitchell 1995). Any

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- 6 A public is about social processes, practices and relations between people that negotiate social differences. And it therefore happens in spaces where social differences are very often evident: in streets, shops, parks, malls, markets, squares, playgrounds, car parks, stations. All of these places become “public” when social differences are negotiated within them. Public spaces, then, do not simply exist. Their existence depends, instead, on what happens in them, what kinds of interactions take place to create them (Massey & Rose 2002: 6).
- 7 According to both authors, the degree of publicity of an image or a work of art depends upon its ability to generate the encounter between differences in a public space: “*Finally, a piece of public art may provoke or bring out into the open new lines of differentiation*” (Ibid: 9). This analysis of the public space as a place of negotiation, but also of antagonism (Mouffe 2010), has infused a large literature addressing art in the public space, which can easily be extended to the question of the place of images in a broader sense. In that respect, the contributions of Rosalyn Deutsche (1988, 1992, 1996) are particularly enlightening. These note that images derive their publicness from “*politics of representations*”, namely their potential to challenge constructed identities and the illusion of social coherence that results from them (Deutsche 1996: 230) or their ability to deconstruct the limits of what must be considered public problems (Deutsche 1992: 48).
- 8 One must also note that images in the public space are received both at the level of the individual and the collective, which occasionally leads to a form of dissonance. As Pauline Guinard notes, “*the meaning of pictures is thus constructed at both scales, but varies according to the political, social, cultural or economic transformations that affect the spaces in which these pictures are produced and received*” (Guinard 2017). The concept of “dissonance” (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996) highlights the active part of the spectator to generate the meaning of a work or image, both through discourse and behaviour. The reactions of individuals, even to their defending bodies, are part of this significant gap that separates the ideal spectator, projected by the picture or the work, from the real spectator who can seize it to change or destroy its meaning, as in iconoclast gestures.
- 9 Focussing on this gap helps to understand what constitutes spectatorship, because it cannot be reduced to the mere act of looking. The literature on art in public spaces provides relevant insights about spectators and spectatorship. As Joëlle Zask describes in her book on urban sculpture, an outdoor work is perceived by a multitude that is composed neither only of authors and specialists nor strictly of an “audience”. The work can be received not only by isolated *individuals* but also by *masses* and possibly *audiences*. Joëlle Zask distinguishes the *masses* (conglomerates of individuals whose activity is identical, although they do not communicate with one another) (Zask 2013: 125), *individuals* (isolated individuals who take an individual look at the work without feeling the influence of others, or even by closing themselves to it (*ibidem*)), *crowds* (linked by psychological and physical contagion) and *audiences* (characterized by effects of suggestion and communication in the co-construction process of a common object).
- 10 This issue focusses less on the question of the public as *audiences* than on the question of the *publicness* of images – which encompasses both the effects of public space on pictures and how they produce space. Moving away from the conception of pictures as static objects, this issue considers them active agents that reveal the degree of “publicness” of a place and operate the partition of space.

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and of what is in contrast hidden, obscured or concealed in the act itself of producing and exhibiting pictures in public space. The intent is to investigate pictures in terms of places and locations and to analyse what they say about both spatial and social space; are they exhibited in a central place or at the margins? What degree of visibility results from their exposure and location? In other words, what is really made visible? What do we believe we see when we see? Considering that the production and exposure of pictures are always an invisible system, yet still there when one look at them, one can say that pictures always hold a political dimension.

- 12 Beyond legal dimensions, pictures reveal how “politics of visibility” (Brighenti 2010: 137) are constructed at the scale of a place or a city. In that sense, the question raised in this issue is political because it concerns, in the broad sense, not only the organization and exercise of power in a society but also, in the strict sense of politics as the practice of power, the conflicts for power, representation and representativeness, whose public space is one of the arenas.

Representation and Representativeness

- 13 This special issue brings together a wide variety of contributions on the place, role and power of images in the public space. Beyond the cross-sectional question of visibility, the authors published here address a wide range of objects and approaches. Moving away from a unique answer or single approach to resolve the question “what do images in the public space do?” the different contributions constitute a disciplinary patchwork that reflects situated knowledge and positions to discuss the performativity of images in the public space. The authors come from various academic backgrounds – philosophy, geography, urban planning, history or art history – and work on a wide range of case studies (although they are mostly Europeans) that raise a series of common issues that we wish to address here.

- 14 The different articles of the issue complement one another on the following points: different types of spaces (centre or periphery), the constitution of collective memory and the problem of representation in terms of hegemony or resistance.

- 15 One can observe the spatial dichotomy between the articles addressing images in the centres (see the contributions of Olivier Gaudin, Vivien Philizot, Tanja Schult and Diana I. Popescu and Laurent Viala) and others studying images at the periphery (see the contributions of Damien Darcis and Zara Fournier). This overview cannot reduce the diversity of the case studies presented, but it reinforces the argument of variability in the performativity of images, depending on the areas where they are produced and exhibited. This diversity is one of the strengths of this issue because it raises the question of visibility in areas as central as New York Station or the public squares of Bologna, Montpellier or Vienna, and in more marginal areas such as Calais or southern Lebanon.

- 16 The question of memory is also a frequent angle of analysis in some of the articles. The cross-sectional question of visibility is thus apprehended not only in terms of space but also from a diachronic perspective. Which are the traces of the past made visible? For how long are the images displayed in the public space? What type of impact does their absence have? The highly political aspect of making the past visible is addressed in several articles, examining the study of commemorative monuments, such as the *Sacrario* of Bologna (see the contributions of Olivier Gaudin), the memorial of Alfred Hrdlicka (see the contributions of Tanja Schult and Diana I. Popescu), or the Kham

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18 Damien Darcis' philosophical contribution addresses the ambiguous power of images and its political meaning. Focussing on the city of Calais, he studies both graffiti and street art produced in the migration context, which leads him to compare two different types of pictures: the street art produced by the artist Banksy, highly publicized and explicitly political, and the anonymous graffiti that he named "*the hearts of cardboard*", produced by "*both French and migrants*" without any apparent political message. Drawing upon Rancière's writings, he develops a theory of images in which the political power of pictures comes not from their message but rather from their ability to create "*spheres of specific experience different from that instituted by the distribution of functions and hierarchical places that constitute the established order*". For Damien Darcis, images are political not because of their ability to denounce or oppose head-on, but because of the possibilities they offer to invent another space and another time.

19 The article by Zara Fournier focusses on southern Lebanon. Numerous images – billboards, posters and statues – occur in public space, always bearing a political dimension. She questions how society produces images and towards what end in this context of post-conflict and economic instability. Her argument is based on a case study of the former Khiam prison, situated in a marginal space and used by the Israeli army and Lebanese armed groups from 1985 to 2000. After that, Hezbollah transformed the prison into a museum until 2006, when the Israeli army bombed the place and destroyed it. By jointly analysing the place, its different destinations, and the succession of images produced and presented in this place, the author questions the regimes of the visible and the invisible in Khiam, and more broadly in southern Lebanon, and links them to the notion of palimpsest and memory traces.

20 Olivier Gaudin studies the *Sacrario* of Bologna, a photographic monument – the result of a spontaneous initiative – in memory of the partisans killed during the Second World War. By basing his conceptual framework on the human ecology of the Chicago School and the contributions of Pragmatism, he combines the contributions of visual and urban studies to develop an approach that considers social interactions and the physical and symbolic environment of the context in the study of images in the public space. These aspects are all contextual elements that, for the author, reflect interactions between human actors and objects and change the meaning that an image can have and its perception by the public. For Olivier Gaudin, each passer-by, who comes into contact with the monument, brings their own knowledge of the past and their own share of memory, which guide their reception of the image.

21 The contribution of Vivien Philizot discusses how the gaze is constructed in public space through advertising images. As a historian of design, he focusses on the case of Kodak's Colorama – a large billboard exhibited in Grand Central Station (New York) that was used for many years to project photographs showing idealized images of the white and heteronormed American family. He then examines the question of the social construction of the visual in the light of a new regime of images linked to the omnipresence of smartphone screens. This new use of the value of images – which invites spectators to enter the frame – allows them to appear as never before, neither true nor false. Vivien Philizot thus considers images ideological vectors but in which the advertising surface has, for decades, masked power relationships; the omnipresence of digital images assumes its ideology and takes up – to neutralize them – the criticisms that were directed at advertising images.

22 Tanja Schult and Diana I. Popescu invite us to reflect on the performative power of memorials. Focussing on an Alfred Hrdlicka Second World War memorial in Vienna, the authors question the gap between the artist's intentions and the effects produced by

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audience and a context, images acquire in the public space a political power that often exceeds their creator.

- 23 Laurent Viala is interested in the politics of statuary in the public space and questions the meaning of public action in favour of statuary and the political rhetoric that goes with it. Inspired by Pragmatism, the author establishes a phenomenology of public statuary images. He thus distinguishes three modalities of the representation of power in the statuary demonstration: to represent power; to legitimize public action; and to produce consensus. His argument is based on the case study of Montpellier (France), which had an active policy in commissioning and exhibiting figurative statues. For the author, the statues in question function as “*images of images*” that seek to give a representation of the city by invoking well-known references (mythological, national or world history figures). They then tell a political history of the city and reflect intents, which do not necessarily correspond to a historical truth.

Audience Studies: the “Black Box” of Social Sciences

- 24 Finally, if this issue proposes a reflection on what images do in the public space by focussing on the modalities of their production and their visibility, the endorsement or rejection of the process often remain the uncovered part in the articles. Although the performativity of an image on a given audience arises as a methodological issue, reception is nevertheless addressed in some of the articles presented here (see the contributions of Olivier Gaudin, Zara Fournier, Diana Popescu & Tanja Schult). To go further, we have included in the summary of this issue a review of the book *Urban Encounters: Art and the Public* (see the contribution of Léa Sallenave & Hugo Bonin), which can be inspiring to renew methods related to reception studies insofar as the contributions of this book challenge the strict limits of academic writing to move towards a form of creative research.

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By this author

Graffiti in Palestinian Refugee Camps: from palimpsest walls to public space [Full text]

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L'art en chantier: The arts, and the city in the making [Full text]

Book review of: Tonnelat, S. 2016. *L'art en chantier*, Stefan Shankland et l'Atelier/TRANS305. Paris, Archibooks.

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