

Analysing public art and geography



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How can public art challenge the gendered nature of space?

The world is getting more and more visual, and increasingly meanings are communicated through visuals (Rose, 2001). It is the aim of this research proposal to outline the final year project that is going to focus on interdisciplinary themes of space, art and gender. It will demonstrate how human geography engages with visual art, and how the research linking the two has expanded over the past few decades. It will show the issues that one may be presented with when researching art. An explanation will be given of how gender and body are viewed in geography.

Geography and visual art

Geography is recognised as a very visual discipline (Driver, 2003; Tolia-Kelly, 2012), that extensively engages with our vision (Roberts, 2012), and geographers have long been using various types of visual imagery and objects in their work (Garrett, 2011; Rose, 2003). Over the past decades, namely since the cultural turn, there has been greater interest in potential links between visual arts and geography (Rose, 2001). During this time the field of research has expanded from looking at landscape paintings from earlier centuries, to analysing broader spectrum of artistic mediums, both digital and analogue (Hawkins, 2012). It is understood that everyday images and objects that we see are not meaningless and static things, but are imbued with meanings that affect our behaviour and interaction with the world (Hall, 1997).

Art in public space

The term ‘art’ itself is an extremely broad concept, and there are many sub-disciplines in art that can be used to narrow down the research. This

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particular research is going to be focused on art in urban space. Nowadays many urban spaces are rich with artworks which are done in various mediums, and by utilising various methods. Arguably the traditional form of art in public space is public art. Public art commonly is defined as “ either permanent or temporary artworks, including social and contextual art practices which are commissioned for openly accessible locations, that is, outside conventional settings such as museums and galleries (Zebracki, 2013: 303).”

An artwork may have an intended meaning, a set of ideas or ideals that its author wants the world to receive, and a meaning that is created by the audience upon its consumption (Baldwin et al., 1999). What makes it hard to predict how public art will be consumed, are the diverse publics or audiences that encounter it. A piece of art may be aimed at general public, but when different social groups read it , the diversity of meanings that it actually produces have to be taken into account. Therefore, in this sense the study of public art becomes a study of “ the reception of art by [its] publics (Miles, 1997: 85).”

Geography, body and gender

Geographers see body as a space. Many quote Rich when he talks about the body as “ the geography closest in (1986: 212).” It is the border between the inner world and the outer world. It is a space that is sexed and gendered, where sex is a biological product and gender a social one (Valentine, 2001). However, more recent academic work blurs the lines between the two, arguing that there is evidence of cases where bodies do not abide by the

traditional views of sex and gender (Cream, 1995), and that both should be considered as social (Valentine, 2001).

In social research gender is understood as “ social, psychological or cultural differences between men and women (Knox and Pinch, 2010: 235).”

Historically geographers have viewed differences in gender roles as socially constructed (Castree et al., 2013). Therefore, characteristics that constitute what it means to be masculine or feminine are subject to change in space, place and time. More recently academics such as Judith Butler (1990) have challenged this view, and suggest that gender is a performance, rather than what one is. She argues that gender is performed through ritualistic repetition. From this viewpoint, which some call as post-structuralist (Jagger, 2008), gender is “ sustained through acts, gestures, mannerisms, fashion, and lifestyle (Castree et al., 2013: 172).”

Identities, roles and spatial relations between males and females in geography have often been analysed utilising feminist viewpoint.

Predominant argument of feminist philosophy is that women in many areas of life are still unfairly treated as being in a subordinate position to men, and that the Western society remains largely patriarchal (Knox and Pinch, 2010).

New Genre Public Art, Body and Gender

Massey (1994) describes how large public spaces are reserved for males, and how often artworks depicting bodies of women are produced by men contributing to the male gaze, which extends outside the walls of galleries and museums (Miles, 1997). This prevalent masculine worldview is

challenged by activism that is empowered by forms of new genre public art (Lacy, 1995).

If we are to consider the relationship between public art and gender, the historical divorce that has existed between body and city, where most public artworks are found, should be kept in mind. Undesirable body processes are expelled from the city, and the civilised body is expected to contain them (Miles, 1997). This idea comes from the Cartesian view that body should be subject to mind (Longhurst, 1997). In Western culture body has become associated with negative traits, emotions and femininity, and mind with rationality, knowledge and masculinity (Valentine, 2001). Furthermore, it is somehow seen that men transcend the body, for whom it is merely a container of their mind, and that women are more affected by their “fleshy” (Longhurst, 1997: 491) instincts and therefore their bodies.

Moreover, this view has had an influence on social sciences. Rose (1993) argues that white males tend to other difference, and that this has shaped how geography has been studied over the years. It was only in the latter part of the 20th century that academics started to critically look at how mind has been given privilege over the body in geography (Longhurst, 1997), and it was recognised that in fact everyone is affected by their embodiment (Rose, 1997).

Body is the tool through which masculinity or femininity is acted out (Puwar, 2004). As performativity suggests, these materialise through the act of doing. It is therefore the aim of this research to analyse how public art

captures these performances, and how it communicates and constructs gender in the eyes of its publics.

Case study

Butler's work is often linked with gender and performativity, but it is rarely used when public art is studied. This research will try to expand the body of work on new genre public art considering gender politics. It will take into the account the latest research on gender and performativity, and will analyse how perceived gender roles are read through performances and acts that are captured in public artworks. Greater Manchester has been chosen as the site for the research, with public artworks that range from sculptures depicting historic figures from Britain's imperial past, such as, Queen Victoria, to contemporary street art that seeks to challenge the status quo, such as found in Northern Quarter.

Conclusion

This research proposal outlined the final year project that will analyse public art and gender by looking at performances that are captured in artworks. It demonstrated how body and gender are understood in geography. It showed how body is an agent through which gender is acted out, and how body as an artistic subject captures these performances. Art has been an important part of geographical work and research in the past, and as the visual imagery and objects become more important in the modern society, more and more meanings are conveyed through visuals. This research will explore what meanings public art conveys about gender roles, and how these meanings are read by artworks' publics.

The main aim of this research is: to analyse the way public art can challenge the gendered nature of space.

The objectives to achieve this are: to explore the way that Tankpetrol aims to disrupt traditional genderings of public space; to analyse the meanings encoded in the artwork of Tankpetrol; to analyse the consumption of Tankpetrol's artwork and how it impacts on people's ideas of gendering public space.

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