

FURNISHING POSITIONS 00

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ISSUE 00

BLACKWOOD GALLERY, UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO MISSISSAUGA

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SIX PARADOXES OF PUBLIC SPACE

ADRIAN BLACKWELL

Since the financial crisis of 2008, we have watched a resurgence of political demonstrations and occupations in the Middle East, North Africa, China, Greece, Spain, the United Kingdom, and North America that have reanimated the concept of public space. In each case, citizens gathered in squares and streets, in opposition to today's political economy of austerity and inequality. For over thirty years neoliberalism has effected a two-pronged assault on public space: on the one hand it has been transformed almost entirely into a space of capital flow, and on the other it has become more heavily surveilled. These two forms of enclosure—one by the market, the other by the state—appear as opposites, but they function as complementary dimensions of neoliberalism, which pursues a relentless opening of markets while intensifying society's social and economic disparities.

To better understand this contemporary situation it is worth returning to Jurgen Habermas's concept of the "public sphere" in order to sketch a provisional definition of "public space." Habermas conceived of the public sphere as a mediating or communicating zone between public authority and the private sphere, emerging in an essentially sympathetic relation to new forms of bourgeois governance in Europe. It was in this sense that the bourgeois public sphere could strive to operate as a locus of rational communication between the two other realms and our conception of "publicness" in both its senses (public authority and the public sphere) is tied to the invention of bourgeois private property.

The emergence of the modern private property regime was a profound event, because it severed the obligations that existed within earlier land-use regimes to create a form of land that is on the one hand open to all and alienable at any time, and on the other, owned absolutely and entirely monopolizable. The construction of this historically specific form of private space was coincident with the production of a repertoire of new spaces of public authority, such as urban avenues, parks, government buildings, libraries, prisons, and hospitals, which were all produced to solidify social control. Capitalism is thus founded on the co-production of two realms: the entirely unequal system of private property, and spaces of public authority whose function is to surveil and normalize capitalist subjects.

If we apply the emergent concepts of private property and public authority to space, we can think of public space as analogous to the public sphere, as a physical space in which private people come together in order to question both the state and the economy. In this conception, we end up with

three spaces: private economic space, spaces of public authority, and "public spaces." Given that all space in democratic capitalist society is legally controlled through the rights of sovereign or private property, public space must always be constructed on top of a space governed either by the private economy or public authority. Public space is always an appropriation, a layering of a political space over legal space. This is clear when we take a quick glance at the physical spaces in which publics have asserted their power and produced new democratic knowledge, from public squares to universities, coffee houses, and private homes. These are spaces built either by public authorities or private economic agents (or some combination of the two); public spaces only appear within them when they are actively constructed.

So what exactly is produced when a public space is made? Insofar as it is a thoroughly capitalist institution, a locus of criticism internal to capitalism, public space always involves the construction of a paradox within physical space. It is not that public space today appears contradictory, rather that spaces of public authority and private economy are themselves contradictory, and public space is the construction of a spatial and material argument that brings their contradictions to light.

Furnishing Positions is a sculpture, a broadsheet, and a set of conversations that will stage the paradox of public space according to six encounters: affinity and disagreement, representation and presentation, people and things, materiality and immateriality, privacy and publicity, and city and urbanization. By thinking of public space in terms of its essential polarities, a field of contestation is opened between extremes, providing a conceptual space for discussion and disagreement.

SCULPTURE

Furnishing Positions consists of a set of thirty structurally similar pieces of furniture; each has steel legs and a plywood top. The furniture has four different heights: 30cm, 60cm, 90cm, and 120cm, roughly the heights of a bench, a table, a counter, and a ledge. Each piece is curved to form one-sixth of a circle, so that six pieces can assemble to form a ring of various heights. The circles are adjacent and concentric so that the furniture can be assembled to form a circular amphitheatre, but it can also be arranged in an almost infinite set of other configurations. For the Blackwood Gallery, the sculpture will be reconfigured six times and will function as furniture on which to stage a set of public conversations on the constitutive paradox of public space. The sculpture embraces historian of science Bruno Latour's assertion that all things are assemblages, strange and monstrous hybrids of diverse elements. Not least among these monsters, society itself is made up of the most complex composition of people and things. What this social monster needs are places of assembly that can gather together its various parts: people, their desires, and their matters of concern. *Furnishing Positions* is designed to catch and assemble these heterogeneous elements in its changing forms.

BROADSHEET

Furnishing Positions is a serial publication that focuses on the paradoxical nature of public space. Its standard form is an 18"x18" broadsheet, consisting of an artist's project on one side and a text on the other. It will be published once every two weeks for three months, starting September 15, 2014, with each issue focusing on a specific paradox. As a serial, each issue builds on earlier editions. As each issue is published, it will be hung and made available for free in the Blackwood Gallery, posted to the gallery's website, posted in public sites, and circulated electronically. As the exhibition progresses these broadsheets will accumulate, generating and animating conversations in the space.

CONVERSATIONS

On November 22–23, 2014, The Blackwood Gallery will host a two-day hybrid event open to the general public. The *Furnishing Positions* event will be structured as a set of six conversations, each on a different paradox of public space, between the artists and writers who contributed to the *Furnishing Positions* broadsheet. Throughout the exhibition *Furnishing Positions* will be used by University of Toronto Mississauga faculty and students as an alternative classroom environment to provoke new forms of dialogue and to enable in situ, experiential learning opportunities.

ISSUE 01, 15/09/2014

ABBAS AKHAVAN |
KANISHKA GOONEWARDENA

AFFINITY | DISAGREEMENT:
WHAT DRAWS PEOPLE TO PUBLIC
SPACE?

The most fundamental paradox of public space is that people assemble because they have something in common, but at the same time they are only compelled to do so because they disagree with others about something that affects their lives. Contemporary political theorists have argued that disagreement lies at the heart of any political assembly, while others have emphasized the importance of the affinities that draw people together. If both of these claims are true, then public space has to accommodate the complexities of both consensus and dissensus.

ISSUE 02, 29/09/2014

DYLAN MINER | CHEYANNE TURIONS

REPRESENTATION | PRESENTATION:
IS PUBLIC SPACE MADE
BY GOVERNMENT OR CITIZENS?

One of the fundamental confusions about the concept of public space is whether it refers to spaces funded and built by an elected government, or to spaces appropriated by citizens in order to contest government policies. This tension emerged with the rise of modern democracy, predicated as it is on the election of representatives through majority vote. In this form of democracy, citizens no longer speak in their own voices but through others, and a gap opens between the peoples' demands and the motivations of government. Within this situation, public space emerges as a locus where people can present themselves to others in political contestation, rather than relying on their representatives to act in their best interest.

ISSUE 03, 13/10/2014

GREIG DE PEUTER | PAIGE SARLIN

MATERIALITY | IMMATERIALITY:
ARE PUBLIC SPACES PHYSICAL
OR VIRTUAL?

For Habermas, the public sphere that emerged in the eighteenth century was a space that was both physical—in the streets, coffee houses, and social clubs—and virtual—embedded in media such as newspapers and journals. Today's media are even less material, as the Internet allows anyone with access to a computer to produce and disseminate her or his ideas on the web. However, this process remains highly contested, and the proliferation of digital information means that every individual statement has less value than it once did. The most recent social movements emerged through and occupied complex hybrids of immaterial and material public spaces.

ISSUE 04, 27/10/2014

KAREN HOULE |
KIKA THORNE

PEOPLE | THINGS:
ARE PUBLIC SPACES ONLY FOR
HUMANS?

A public is always thought of as a group of people, but public spaces are non-human, and they include not simply inanimate materials with their specific histories, but also many non-human forms of life. Bruno Latour has argued that this split between people and things is the foundational ruse of modernity, and is responsible for many of our current social and environmental problems. What would happen if we included non-human actors in our understanding of politics, and in our public spaces?

ISSUE 05, 10/11/2014

ERIC CAZDYN |
CHARLES STANKIEVECH

PRIVACY | PUBLICITY:
IS PRIVATE THOUGHT THE NECESSARY
COROLLARY OF PUBLIC SPACE?

The public sphere is always tightly tied to dominant ideologies, which in turn delimit what is possible and what is not, what is real and what is pure fantasy. As a result, many people and positions are excluded from public space. Political theorists such as Nancy Fraser and Michael Warner have argued that under these conditions we need multiple publics, or what they call *counter-publics*—conversations within which smaller groups of people can build arguments, gestures, and practices in opposition to the dominant culture and at a distance from it. It is only through the preservation of certain forms of privacy that we can have meaningful forms of public space.

ISSUE 06, 24/11/2014

MARY LOU LOBSINGER |
SCOTT SØRLI

CITY | URBANIZATION:
HOW DO PUBLIC SPACES COMBINE
TO MAKE CITIES?

Architectural historian Pier Vittorio Aureli claims that the ancient Greek City-State, the polis, predates politics and that politics was born in the city. Today many people argue that the city (at least as it was defined before the twentieth century) no longer exists. Instead of discrete cities with defined boundaries, we have a continuous and planetary process of urbanization. However, even this process involves public space insofar as the infrastructures that facilitate this sprawl are public goods. This voracious and expanding system of organization is not primarily political, but economic, and as a result its public spaces are apolitical and thus unable to offer a locus for rational resistance to the expansionary and destructive logic of development.

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Adrian Blackwell is an artist, designer, and urban theorist whose work focuses on the relation between physical spaces and political economic forces. His artwork and designs have been exhibited at artist-run centres and public institutions in Canada, the U.K., the U.S., and China. In Spring 2014 he showed *Circles Describing Spheres* in "if I can't dance to it, it's not my revolution" at Haverford College, Pennsylvania and "Getting Rid Of Ourselves" at OCAD University's Onsite Gallery. His current writing examines the polarities of global neoliberal urbanization, using Shenzhen as a case study. Recent publications include "Forms of Enclosure in the Instant Modernization of Shenzhen" in *Volume* and "What is Property? Notes on the Topology of Land as the 'Historical Precondition' and 'Permanent Foundation' of Capitalist Architecture," in the *Journal of Architectural Education*. He has been a visiting professor at Harvard's Graduate School of Design and is an assistant professor at the University of Waterloo School of Architecture. He was a member of Toronto's Anarchist Free School and the Toronto School of Creativity & Inquiry and is currently an editor of the journal *Scappagato: Architecture | Landscape | Political Economy*.

