Renegotiations
THE ROLE OF PUBLIC ART IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM
Public Art:
An attempt to navigate
// Håkan Nilsson

Introduction
Defining “public art” is easier said than done. The word “public” itself gives rise to a variety of different and sometimes conflicting interpretations. For example, do we mean “public” with respect to “the public sector” and thus, in the case of art, as something financed through public funds? This is not uncommon. In 2019, when The Swedish Arts Grants Committee conducted a survey of the so-called 1% rule, they chose to define a “public environment” as “environments owned or used by the public, i.e., the state, region or municipality.”

Or do we mean the public space, which, since the liberalization and deregulation policies of the 1980s and 90s, relies less and less on public funds and instead is the conglomeration of private, commercial, municipal and state spaces – not forgetting today, the mixing of physical as well as virtual arenas? The aim of this text is to explore different definitions of public art and to discuss the situations and contexts in which public art exists.

The privatization of public space is a recurring theme in public discourse, which in turn largely plays out through private channels, such as the editorial pages of newspapers. This is to be expected, at least if we follow the logic of the social and critical theorist Jürgen Habermas, who has made a major contribution to this debate regarding the bourgeois public sphere. Habermas has argued that public discourse must be protected from the influence of the state, not least since it is the public that scrutinizes the activities of the state.

Habermas thus points to a third definition of the public sphere, in addition to the aforementioned “state-funded” and “common” (which can, but does not have to, include the commonly owned) definitions. This third understanding of the public sphere is concerned with how public

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2 Jürgen Habermas, Borgerlig offentlighet: kategorierna "privat" och "offentligt" i det moderna samhället [The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society], trans. Joachim Retzlaff (Lund: Arkiv förlag, 1984).
discourse (and public space) is to be kept open, an essential element in the preservation of democracy. These different perspectives on the nature of the public sphere affect how we view public art. Before turning to the question of how art can act to “scrutinize”, it might first be beneficial if we continue to explore the concept of the “public” in terms of the commons.

The fact that something is public does not mean it is accessible to everyone, even if we are speaking of art exhibited in a public environment and financed with public funds. The Government Offices of Sweden, prisons, and infectious disease departments are all possible sites of public art to which only a small number of people have access. The website sl.se describes the Stockholm metro as “the world’s longest art exhibition”, but to access it you need to buy a ticket.3

Furthermore, the fact that something is accessible to all does not mean that it is publicly funded. Private housing companies fund art in squares and parks; private initiators raise money to erect memorials to individuals they wish to honor; private donation boards fund public art: for example, Eva Bonniers donationsnämnd (Eva Bonnier’s Donation Board) works “to initiate and hold dialogues on the role of art and architecture in the public space, as well as to implement art projects.”4

However, the fact that art is public and accessible to all does not necessarily mean that it is commissioned or paid for by either public or private actors. It is becoming increasingly common for artists and artist-led initiatives to claim space in the public domain without having been commissioned. This may be because they want to create an independent platform to discuss the public sphere (in Habermas’ sense), or because they want to occupy certain spaces in order to demonstrate their potential. It may also be because there is nowhere else to act, or because the street is simply the place where they want to be seen by a wider public, as may be the case for street art and graffiti.

In other words, public art is a concept that encompasses both art commissioned by the authorities and art that opposes the very same authorities. This is just one of the many paradoxes that arise in the conversation about public art.

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3 www.sl.se [accessed 05/10/2019].
4 https://www.evabonniersdonationsnamnd.se/sv/ [accessed 11/12/2019]
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The field of public art

Public art is described and discussed in a variety of contexts, but only in exceptional cases does it appear in forums that concern “ordinary” art. Critical appraisals in newspapers and online journals mainly deal with art which finds its way into galleries and museums, even if there are occasional targeted efforts, for example, when kunstkritikk.se looked at several recently installed public works in the country. The upshot is that if one wants to read more about public art, one must turn to other sources.

Larger commissioning bodies, such as Public Art Agency Sweden, county councils/regions and larger municipalities, publish books on the year’s initiatives and/or volumes relating to all the art associated with any major project. Many municipalities have also put together inventories of their own holdings. These publications also include major initiatives, often based on a specific theme, such as the 2005 report by Public Art Agency Sweden on approximately 1,500 building-related artworks it has funded since 1937. This led to the further report, Beställd konst: Fastighetsägarnas vård och underhåll av byggnadsanknuten konst (Commissioned Art: The Care and Maintenance of Building-Related Art by Property Owners), published in 2008. The central question raised in the report from 2008 was whether public building-related art could be given the same long-term protection as historical art in churches and castles. The inventory in turn laid the groundwork for the research project Offentlig konst: Ett kulturarv (Public Art: A Cultural Heritage) from 2014, where, in a comprehensive publication bearing the same name, several cases were discussed in greater detail.

Public art can thus be studied through a variety of sources and literature. Its history and creative processes can be studied at, for example, the Skissernas Museum in Lund, which has the world’s largest collection of sketches, models and preparatory work for both Swedish and international public art. Knowledge of street art and graffiti is

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7 Wahlström Beställd konst [Commissioned Art], op.cit., p. 5.

Disseminated through certain magazines and publications. The publishing house Dokument Press, for example, has published a large number of volumes since 2000. But knowledge is also spread via social media, which is logical given the short-lived character of this art form. Writing on the subject is also prolific, with pieces functioning as much as a guide to public art as a reflection on it. Det där är väl ingen konst? (That's not Art, is it?) is based on a several controversial public artworks. From commissioning and jury deliberation to the often angry reactions from various quarters, the book provides a broad yet multifaceted picture. Otherwise, it is common for publications on public art to function as a kind of guidebook, structured like art walks, such as Konst på stan (Art in the City).

Even as a field of research, “public art” shows great variety in terms of what is selected as public art and the issues that public art addresses. The research survey conducted by Södertörn University and the Valand Academy, on behalf of Public Art Agency Sweden, demonstrates this breadth. To exemplify this, one can look at the state of contemporary research on alternative art practices. Indeed, since the 2010s, four doctoral theses have been written on graffiti and street art in Sweden. Only two of these fall within the domain of art history, though neither discuss such phenomena from a strictly aesthetic perspective. The other two theses come from the disciplines of landscape architecture and media studies. What this tells us is that a variety of different disciplinary fields are interested in public art. Not only art history; it is a phenomenon that involves urbanists, ethnologists, sociologists, economists, gender studies scholars, landscape architects, interior designers, architects and, of course, artists. A large number of artistic doctoral theses are also based on practices in public spaces.

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9 https://dokument.org/ [accessed 09/30/2019].
13 See, for example, Roland Ljungberg, Kunskaps- och vattenrum: Delprojekt i konstnärlig upplevelsepark för hållbar utveckling [Knowledge and Water Spaces: Subproject on an artistic adventure park for sustainable development] (Stockholm: Konstfack, 2014); Lisa Torell, Potential of the Gap, doctoral thesis (Tromsø: Tromsø Academy of Contemporary Art and Creative Writing, 2018). Both projects demonstrate the breadth of artistic research.
The breadth of perspectives and issues arising out of “public art” raises questions about how we should view it in relation to other art. According to the philosopher and art theorist Arthur Danto, since at least the 1960s, “art” has been understood as whatever the “art world” decides it to be, that is, potentially anything.\footnote{Arthur Danto, “Konstvärlden” [The Artworld] in \textit{Konsten och konstbegrepp} [Art and the Concept of Art] (Stockholm: Raster, 1996).} Faced with such a definition, public art becomes a narrower form of art. On the other hand, looking at the practice itself and the many questions it raises, public art, with its new viewers, its commissioning bodies, its fields of research, its possible and impossible venues and its many different regulations, represents an expansion of the concept of art.

**Public art/art in public space**

One way of structuring what public art could possibly be is to distinguish between what is commissioned by and financed through public funds, what is commissioned by another major actor and, finally, what is created by way of other initiatives. But this is also a division that is difficult to maintain; a great deal of public art falls into grey areas. In the wake of the privatization of state-owned companies and the deregulation of the service sector, which began in the 1990s, the boundary between the private and the public has become blurred and fluid. Not least, this has contributed to the fact that art, which once fell into the category ‘public,’ with the sale of companies and properties, art suddenly became private, perhaps even moving from once having been accessible to the general public to now not being so.

It is not only deregulation and privatization that have changed the art world, however. As public art engages more actors, the field becomes more professionalized and specialized. “Commissioned” public art is increasingly managed and administered by private curators and art mediators, who are hired by both municipalities and private actors to handle procedures ranging from citizen dialogues to artist selection and the placement of artworks. \textit{ArtPlatform} is an art agency that started in 2001, mainly working as a commissioning agent for private and municipal real estate and construction companies. Since 2016, there has been an increase in commissions coming from municipalities’ and regions’ public art departments, and today, they work much more with municipalities and regions than they do directly with private actors.\footnote{In an e-mail dated 11/18/2020, Åsa-Viktoria Wihlborg puts that percentage at 80-20 in favor of municipalities and regions.}
Professionalization requires that actors maintain a dual perspective. As Magdalena Malm describes, the greatest challenge for the contemporary curator is the need to simultaneously understand the intended audience and the artist’s working process. She described her position as a curator, shortly before she took over as director at Public Art Agency of Sweden (2012-2020), as follows:

This ability to change position and step inside both perspectives is a continuous movement that is central to the work of most curators. My thoughts move into the artist’s imagination, and immerse themselves in what shape the work could take, they move on, out to the audience and into their minds, into their bodies, trying to imagine what they will experience... 

On the other hand, we are also seeing the emergence of private organizations, such as the independent digital platform konstpool, which aims to raise artists’ awareness of public calls for proposals and to help artists with the often complicated application procedure, resulting from the bureaucratization of the process when public procurement law applies.

Public art can emerge in the context of art exhibitions, which take place in an art gallery or a museum, but which extend beyond the gallery space; for example, ArkDes’ exhibition “Public Luxury - Architecture, Design and the Struggle for the Common” (2018) or “Acting in the City” at Norrköping Art Museum (2013-14), which sought to “use the city as a stage”. Public art can also emerge as part of various art school programs. At the time of writing, Valand, Konstfack and the Royal Institute of Art offer courses in public art, or, to use the precise wording of Konstfack, in the “open”. Sometimes public art arises as part of other educational projects. In 2017, for example, the ART KOD (ART CODE) project used art to help young people influence their environment.

19 Tobias Barenthin Lindblad, Art Kod: Demokrati, konst och det offentliga rummet [Art Code: the municipalities.
Sometimes public art occurs through temporary exhibitions in the public space (where certain works are made permanent), such as Borås’ sculpture biennial and Örebro’s Open art. It is created through private initiatives, sometimes receiving public support such as Umedalen’s sculpture park, Konstvägen Sju Älvar, Wanås Konst, Konst på Hög Kumla or Pilane at Tjörn. Sculpture parks also include municipally initiated and funded projects, such as Görvälns sculpture park in Järfalla as well as locally, artist-organized exhibitions such as Skulpturparken in Ängelsberg. I have already mentioned that the number of self-initiated art projects in the public space is a growing and significant part of the art world. When Public Art Agency Sweden announced the call for “Local Art Projects” in 2018, it targeted both municipalities and non-profit organizations. It received 382 applications from a wide range of applicants – municipalities, local art spaces, further education colleges, libraries and many individual artists. Add to this graffiti and street art, which are a ubiquitous but not always legal part of the public streetscape.

The latter examples remind us that public space as an arena for art remains a question of access. The battle over which expressions should be accepted and given space is complicated. Art historian Jacob Kimvall writes in the book Noll tolerans (Zero Tolerance) that the issue of graffiti is a question of definitions, where it has been important for zero tolerance proponents to make graffiti synonymous with scribbling. In a further step, this link turns all graffiti into vandalism and therefore illegal. Illegal activity, in turn, creates insecurity. In the controversial mural festival, Wall Street, that took place in Nacka (a region outside Stockholm), in 2019, Nacka municipality tried to create a mural festival with elements of graffiti with the intention of “increasing security”, of enhancing “well-being and safety in the public environment” by introducing a “program code” in which a new “DNA” would be created for the works to be exhibited. These included a cultivation of becoming a “masterful” street artist instead of the “rebel”, substituting “anger” for “wisdom”, “illegal” for “illegal”, etc. It is quite a coincidence that in Nacka, some 20 years earlier, in the

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20 Public Art Agency Sweden’s local call for proposals 2018 was part of the so-called Knowledge Hub initiative.


middle of the era of zero tolerance, a number of walls were opened up for legal graffiti.

To be classified as something that generates “insecurity” is doubly unfortunate when it comes to art in public spaces. Public art is often seen as something that helps to keep public space public. In many cases, it is also given the role of a “security creating” actor. In his chapter for this anthology, Oscar Svanelid problematizes how this phenomenon manifests itself at the municipal level when he discusses, among other things, the City of Gothenburg’s initiative Trygg, vacker stad (Safe, Beautiful City). In the report Tro, Hopp och Konst (Faith, Hope and Art), architect and theorist Monica Sand also describes how locally based art groups work to create security. She describes the group Gatukraft Lindängen like this: “...with simple and short-term artistic interventions, they work to create community, security and attention.”

Many stress the importance of the artist’s own interests in engaging in dialogue at a time when society appears more divided. Magdalena Malm, for example, senses an increased interest in the “social” where “the notion of public space has moved back into focus and aspects of the common and the civic have gained new relevance.”

Public space and its role in the survival of democracy is of course a highly relevant issue. Architect Catharina Gabrielsson dedicates over a hundred pages of her doctoral thesis, To Make a Difference, to a historical accounting of the emergence of public space in a Western context, from the time of the Agora in ancient Greece to the present day. This line of reasoning is essential for the discussion she later pursues regarding the role and function of art in the public sphere.

The city’s public spaces
Inevitably, discussions on public art must also include what characterizes public space. In these discussions, power analyses based on the

23 Oscar Svanelid, “Safety Art: On art as a security measure for public spaces”
26 Catharina Gabrielsson, Att göra skillnad: det offentliga rummet som medium för konst, arkitektur och politiska föreställningar [To Make a Difference: Public space as a medium for art, architecture and concepts of the political], doctoral thesis, (Stockholm: Royal Institute of Technology, 2006).
work of French philosophers such as Michel Foucault (1926-1984) and Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995), as well as work by their compatriots Henri Lefebvre (1901-1991) and Michel de Certeau (1926-1986), and the aforementioned Jürgen Habermas, are repeatedly referenced. The philosopher Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) is another important theorist, partly for her argument about the “social” as something that lies between the private and the public, of particular relevance today given how discussions about the position of social media in the public sphere have arisen, and partly for her argument about how the common can only exist as “a multiplicity of perspectives.” In a similar vein, the political theorist Chantal Mouffe, whose *On the Political* has played a major role in the art and architecture debate, argues that public space can be a place where differences meet without leading either to an oversimplified consensus or to pure conflict. Mouffe shifts the focus here from antagonism to “agonism,” which provides space for disagreement without hostility.

The Greek agora, the square in which democracy was born and exercised (by free men), is a kind of archetype for public space. But focusing on the square as the archetypal form can lead to a narrow understanding, the narrowness of which lies in the prioritization of the city over the suburbs and countryside, as noted by poet and architect Lars Erik Raattamaa, among others, calling it ‘metronormativity.’ Accelerating urbanization tends to consign rural and sparsely populated areas to oblivion.

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Street art by Klisterpeter, Stockholm 2021
photo: Jens Sethzman
The turn toward the city from the suburbs is a clear trend, not only in Sweden but worldwide. Concepts such as “city-branding” and “placemaking” reflect the focus in recent decades on cities, rather than regions and countries. In Sweden, urban space, with its dense buildings and supposedly rich street life, has been seen as a remedy for dull, grey suburban life. This marks a radical departure from the ideal of the 1950s and ’60s, marked by the hope that the lush, sparsely built-up suburbs would be the cure for the dead concrete desert of the inner city. In a similar vein, Monika Murzyn-Kupisz and Jarosław Działek note in their foreword to The Impact of Artists on Contemporary Urban Development in Europe that, contrary to what many anticipated, city life generally became even more attractive with the dawn of the digital age. Their article, “Theorising Artists as Actors of Urban Change,” from the same book, also characterizes artists as a group that populates urban spaces to a greater extent than other groups.

In the city, another shift from the public to the private is also visible, as the balance of the housing stock in Sweden’s major cities has shifted from municipally-owned rental housing to, at the time of writing, condominiums. Conversion policies have intensified the debate on gentrification, in which art has played many different roles. Art, aesthetic objects whose actual economic value is difficult to determine, has not least proven to be, precisely, both status- and value-enhancing, notions that have been discussed and problematized in recent decades. An important resource in this discussion is the essay, “Agoraphobia”, by art historian and theorist Rosalyn Deutsche. Another important theorist in this context is art historian Miwon Kwon, whose “One Place After Another” addresses the issue of the “site-specific” and how this concept must be understood in relation to the history and economy of a place, where the artwork relinquishes some of its

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33 The term “gentrification” comes from the British sociologist Ruth Glass, who coined it in her introduction to the anthology London: Aspects of Change back in 1964. The term is derived from the English word “gentry,” which translates into English as “lower nobility” or “the upper middle class.”
autonomy “to integrate art more directly into the realm of the social.” The relationship between the aesthetic/autonomous concept of art and a more process-oriented and open conception is not quite so simple, however. It is not possible to create a dichotomy between one kind of art that adds economic value and another that carries political potential. As Nato Thomson of the American organization “Creative Time” puts it: “You could basically say that any public art piece is helping gentrification.” But the fact that art is something more than a decoration, meaning that it can reaffirm existing power structures and act in an exclusionary way, as well as carry the capacity to engage and create debate and even effectuate positive change, characterizes the international discussion on public art.

At the same time, we see another shift that is philosophically linked to what is called New Materialism. Here, theorists such as Jane Bennett and Donna Haraway have pointed to ways of thinking about “agents” in non-human terms. In the context of the expanding discussion about the Anthropocene and the climate crisis, many artists have come to view rural and sparsely populated areas from very different perspectives. In this context, old dichotomies and hierarchies of city and countryside, inner city and suburb become secondary. Rather, it is a reassessment of what nature is and, from the perspective of the theme of this volume, also a question of what public space and public time can be and how they can be understood.

**The role of public art**

In the Social democrat government’s 2018 bill *Policy for a Designed Living Environment*, it is stated that “art plays an important role in creating public spaces with long-term qualities.” It is also argued that it should “be incorporated in the community building processes at an early stage.” Similar considerations and hopes can be found in the

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38 The *Nationalencyklopedin* defines the Anthropocene as follows: “(from the Greek a nthrōpos ‘man’ and kainō s ‘new’), the age of man, proposed geological epoch usually relating to the period after about 1800, during which man has been a significant factor in the change of the earth’s geology, climate, and ecosystem.”
39 Quotations taken from the abridged version of the *Policy for a Designed Living Environment* 2018
justifications for art projects in both the private and public sectors. Art is often seen as something that will add value (which may or may not entail economic value), as well as something that will increase residents’ sense of place and thus their drive to care for it.

The capacity for art to generate debate and engagement raises hope. This may be the intention with the statement that the arts should “strengthen cultural and democracy-promoting activities in areas with low voter participation,” which guided the government’s major initiative Äga Rum which could be translated to both “taking place” and “owning space.” The initiative was divided between two agencies and resulted in Public Art Agency Sweden’s Art is Happening and the Swedish Arts Council’s Creative Places. The main point of Art is Happening was that Public Art Agency Sweden was not tied to government-funded building projects. Instead, it could turn to civil society through an application procedure for individuals and organizations in these areas of “low voter participation.” Individuals/organizations could propose sites for art, and then (if selected) be matched with one or more artists and architects who would ultimately create a work of art in consultation with the commissioning bodies.40 One question raised by Art is Happening was whether public art is or should be instrumental; that is, whether it should serve a purpose that often lies beyond the artwork-artist-viewer. This question has many roots. While the government writes about the right to artistic independence, we also see that there is a belief that art should facilitate “democracy-promoting activities,” something that, as many have pointed out, is not so straightforward. For while it is easy to sympathize with this ambition, one might wonder, as art scholar Je¬ Werner does, whether art is really capable of, or even should, be burdened with such lofty expectations. In reference to Art is Happening, Werner writes of a paradox. When one looks at how the state, county councils, municipalities or the private sector, spend their money, culture is not a high priority. Yet the expectations of what culture is supposed to achieve with this meager budget are high: “Culture almost always comes second [...] Yet culture

(Ku18:05) p. 7

40 In retrospect, the process has not been easy to understand. In the subsequent analysis of the whole project, it was pointed out that the design of “[b]oth authorities have been in line with the mandates, but the design and implementation of Public Art Agency Sweden has been characterized by greater clarity.” See Kultur I demokratins tjänt. En utvärdering av satsningen Äga rum Rapport 2019:2 [Culture in the Service of Democracy. An evaluation of the Taking Place initiative Report 2019:2] (Stockholm: Swedish Agency for Cultural Policy Analysis, 2019), p. 9.
is accorded high hopes of fixing things that all others have failed to do.”  

Werner describes the arts as both underfunded and overburdened with expectations. He sees this as a symptom of today’s politics, which no longer drives policy issues, but is instead devoted to administration. Hence, he writes:

> [p]olitical expectations that architecture, urban planning, design, art and museums will counteract the dilution of democracy by creating new meeting places, new forms of dialogue and increased engagement among citizens. This reflects a changing view of the role of both politics and culture in society. In the post-democratic state, politics is becoming increasingly administrative in nature, and the administration of society, rather than changes or improvements, becomes the ideal.  

Monica Sand, who was contracted as a participant observer by Public Art Agency Sweden for *Art is Happening*, also sees obvious risks in this equation. In the aforementioned report *Faith, Hope and Art*, she reflects on the change the artistic mission undergoes when art is commissioned to act in the service of democracy: “The artistic mission thus moves from a primarily aesthetic mission to a widened social mission where art can function as a political and social instrument for change.” This, Sand warns, could have “unpredictable consequences for artists and residents alike.”

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42 Werner, *Postdemokratisk kultur* [Postdemocratic Culture], op.cit., p. 139.
On the other hand, we should also note that even the aesthetic object carries a set of values, and in many cases the values it carries are far from straightforward, with its societal-effects being also “unpredictable.” It is partly a question of to whom the work of art appeals, who feels included and who is excluded. It is also about how someone is seen and/or portrayed. Jessica Sjöholm Skrubbe, for example, has discussed how the many nudes of predominantly young women, which were placed in Swedish parks during the era of Folkhemmet, communicate gender norms.44 Similar arguments can be found in Gärd Folkesdotter and Anna-Karin Malmström-Ehrling’s report Spegel, gravsten eller spjutspets? (Mirror, Gravestone or Spearhead?). While covering a longer time span, it is limited to a narrower geographical area, including all artworks in seven towns in Gävleborg County that were placed outdoors in public spaces during the period 1920-2000. The authors

conclude that although the nude, passive woman is a fading presence, it is difficult to detect new trends, i.e. “any work that breaks with known themes of femininity or masculinity or that questions the heterosexual norm.”

From one perspective, “instrumentality” is relatively unproblematic and self-evident: the developer or municipality that invests money in art in a residential area may well do so in order to raise the status and the attitude of the inhabitants toward their local environment. The difficulty is how to do this without creating art that contributes to the gentrification and homogenization of these areas, an ‘unpredictable consequence’ that runs counter to the ambition of strengthening democracy.

However, the idea of art as instrumental in the sense of a democratic tool and catalyst can be described in other terms. In the abovementioned ART CODE project (a collaboration between the Bergslagen Art Foundation and the Örebro Regional Council, among others), the starting point was to involve children and young people in their local environment, with the aim of interlinking this with professional artists who became “tools” to realize their ideas. The book Art Kod: Demokrati, konst och det offentliga rummet Democracy (Art Code: Democracy, Art and Public Space) describes the need to strengthen democracy where “the method, or code, to do this is art, public space and democracy. By working with art, dialogue can be deepened, and Art Code can reveal what children and young people are looking for.”

This does not contradict the fact that the instrumentalization of artists/art can be driven by hidden agendas. As Monika Murzyn-Kupsiz and Jarosław Działek note, since at least the late 1980s, many researchers have pointed out the risks of artists becoming involved and instrumentalized in gentrification processes over which they have no control: “artists may therefore (consciously or unconsciously) be instrumentalized by actors with greater political and economic power.” A case in point is Sharon Zukin, who in The Cultures of Cities (1995), for example, analyzes the changes that SoHo in New York City was undergoing at the time. But Murzyn-Kupsiz and Działek also

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46 Barenthin Lindblad, Art Kod [Art Code], op.cit.
point out that many researchers highlight the opposite results within artistic practice; for example, they refer to Nick Wate’s *The Community Planning Handbook* and point out the tremendous potential the author sees in locally anchored projects: “...[Wate] sees an important potential role for artists in community planning efforts including community art and art workshops...” ⁴⁸

This complex duality is one of the reasons that so many theorists and practitioners stress the importance of ensuring artists are involved early in the process. In this way, the opportunity to maintain control over one’s own process is increased. For example, in Public Art Agency Sweden’s report *Konsten att gestalta offentliga miljöer: Samverkan i tanke och handling* (*The Art of Designing Public Spaces: Collaboration in Thought and Action*) from 2015, the first lesson it seeks to advance is to “[w]ork for early and diverse collaboration between design competencies and other actors.” ⁴⁹ Similar conclusions are drawn by Thomas Borén and Craig Young, who discuss the merits of artists establishing an early presence and being involved in decision-making processes, as opposed to entering a process at a particular point in time without any real knowledge. They emphasize local involvement and see that the best results are achieved when the artist is involved in the place even before conversion or construction processes begin. The authors highlight as one such example Konsthall C in the Stockholm suburb Hökarängen, and its role in the redevelopment of the local area. ⁵⁰

### The artist’s own autonomy and the autonomy of the work of art

Most would agree that achieving a fully autonomous position for public art, from which it can act in isolation, is neither possible nor desirable. Art, as Marcel Duchamp has said, is created in the encounter with the viewer. ⁵¹ For art in public spaces, this encounter potentially occurs with a much more heterogeneous group of viewers than within the walls of, say, a museum or a gallery. This means that parts of the silent contracts,

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⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 25.
as described by the art historian Carol Duncan has, are put out of play.\textsuperscript{52} The artist can neither assume a certain prior understanding nor rely on the museum’s ability to create an interpretation bubble with a certain deference to the work’s status as art.

The question of the autonomy of the artwork and its role in a larger context is thus much more complex in the case of public art than, at first glance, it may seem. This situation can be described in terms of what Irit Rogoff has called “criticality,”\textsuperscript{53} a concept that was discussed during one of the symposia that Södertörn University organized in collaboration with Public Art Agency Sweden in March 2019, as part of the research assignment of which this volume is itself a part. “Criticality” captures the ambivalence that characterizes the position the artist takes when taking a public commission. It implies a renunciation of the classical “critical distance” while at the same time creating space to contribute to an in-depth problematization from within.

\textsuperscript{52} In Civilizing Rituals: Inside public art museums (London: Routledge, 1995), Duncan describes how the museum space is used to educate its visitors, which has other obvious parallels with how public spaces and public art are supposed to promote democracy. The major difference lies in how Duncan depicts the way the viewer is disciplined by and within the museum space.

\textsuperscript{53} Irit Rogoff, “Smuggling – An embodied criticality,” [eipcp.net: 2008]
As an artist, being entrenched in something while maintaining a critical distance is not an easy balancing act. It does not even have to be about explicit expectations from clients. In art critic Dan Jönsson’s analysis of several different public artworks, he nevertheless sees many common aspects despite differences in expression: “The values expressed in these public works are simply those that are considered core democratic values, ‘Swedish values’, as Mona Sahlin [former leader of the Social Democratic Party] once put it, such as community, tolerance, openness and participation.”\(^5\) Jönsson points here to the risk of artists more or less unconsciously taking it upon themselves to portray certain values they perceive the client and/or the political situation calls for. Another complexity lies in assessing how any criticism that the artwork may convey will actually be understood. As

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the artist and architectural theorist Gunnar Sandin notes, cultivating a close relationship with art in the “age of the creative industry” can create commodity-building added value, whether or not the artworks produced actually express a critique of the enterprise itself. “This, because a brand-oriented type of cultural economy, which through events, project placements, education, research programs and you name it, looks to cultivate, for its own profiling purposes, art as a producer of alternatives.”

The literature surrounding public art is full of similar warnings and insights. The artist willingly enters a situation that is both difficult to grasp and to master, and thus also risks falling into a disadvantageous position, despite having good intentions. Sometimes this leads to stranded projects where, for one reason or another, the artist is forced to terminate the collaboration. However, Borén and Young point to this scenario as one where the artist may be considered the winner: the artist stands with a finished work of art; the client is left empty-handed: “Basically, it is the city and the citizens that seem to be on the losing side in failed collaborations, whereas the artists in many cases make a work of interest anyway (for the public and/or the art scene).”

In other words, art’s potential for autonomy, its criticality and its ability to contribute to values that benefit both local users and the artist are questioned from a variety of positions. “Collaboration” seems to come into conflict with the “autonomy” of the artist. Yet the latter is especially valued by most actors. Artists themselves, but also art intermediaries and curators, see it as crucial to defend the integrity of art. But perhaps the paradox is nothing more than a chimera, since according to several prominent thinkers in the art world, there is no real contradiction. Theorist Claire Doherty, for example, writes that co-influence does not have to mean a sacrifice in quality: “In our experience, empowering our audiences to speak back as a part of the making and unfolding of the work does not necessarily mean the surrender of artistic integrity or artistic authorship, though the terms of engagement need careful attention.” Magdalena Malm even sees the very exchange and mutual respect between the artist and viewer as


56 Borén & Young, “Artists as Planners?,” op.cit., p.302

proof of quality: “Quality stems from consistency, both in the creation of an artwork and its contextual presentation. Quality also ensures that an artwork can be accessible to an audience.”

This is also a central issue in shaping the decision-making processes that accompany a public artwork’s journey from the conceptual to its material realisation. The growing ranks of curators and other ‘intermediaries’ testify to a great deal of educational work both in terms of negotiating with commissioning bodies and dialogue with users. This also results in increased bureaucratization, with artists either relying on outside expertise or having to navigate complex systems of tendering, contracting, regulatory systems and safety regulations themselves. Many artists report increased frustration with this situation.

**Renegotiated game plan: the public arts**

Many of the complexities described above are related to the fact that public art is becoming less and less about “sculptures in the square.” A recurring theme in books and texts on public art from recent decades is that it has simply ‘changed’: established expressions and art forms have been left behind, which in turn has meant that contemporary practice is not as easily captured by a more traditional concept of art. Curator Elisabeth Haglund and art historian Linda Fagerström, for example, begin the anthology *Plats, poetik och politik* (*Place, Poetics and Politics*) from 2010 as follows: “Public art is a concept that has been increasingly challenged, explored and expanded by artists in Sweden and internationally in recent decades.”

It is hard to disagree with them. Publicly commissioned art has been transformed and expanded both in its expression and appeal. It has been quite some time since the public commissioned art to mark the significance of a place or a person; today it is the exception, as in the case with the memorial Lea Porsager, which was commissioned to remember the victims of the tsunami, and inaugurated at Blockhusudden on Djurgården in Stockholm in 2018. It is telling that it took several years for Peter Linde’s statue of


59 Elisabeth Haglund, “Introduction” in Fagerström and Haglund, *Plats, poetik och politik* [Place, Poetics and Politics], op.cit.
the football star Zlatan Ibrahimović to find its place. The work was first intended to be placed outside the Friends Arena in Stockholm in 2017, but after several twists and turns it was unveiled in Malmö in 2019. There, the statue was vandalized after the former Malmö FF icon bought a large part of the Stockholm club Hammarby IF.

Curator Maria Mur Dean describes how the curatorial group/art producers Consonni seek to operate at the intersection between art and the public sphere with something that cannot quite be understood as "public art": “The intersection between art and public sphere does not quite fit into the category 'public art' as it does not refer to work that occupies open physical spaces addressed to a pre-existing public.”60 In the same anthology, Claire Doherty, acting as a spokesperson for the British group Situations, writes similarly about their work as something that cannot be understood with the traditional “public art concept.” Instead, she describes their method as “agitations, dislocations and interventions, and new stories, which remake our sense of place.”61 We can understand why Dan Jönsson writes “[t]he world as well as art has undeniably taken a few turns since the time when a public artwork had basically two functions to choose from: memorial or decoration.”62

But was this ever really true? Art historian Sten Karling describes how long before we even had an idea of a "public sphere," art could be both temporary and included in festivals. Karling describes, for example, the Triumphal Arch that was built with wooden beams, canvas and papier-mâché at Norrbro in Stockholm on the occasion of Queen Kristina’s coronation (1650) and which was left there for a number of years until the weather made its deterioration more or less inevitable.63 And in a more contemporary context, art historian Mårten Snickare reminds us that since antiquity, publicly placed works of art have had a performative character since they require the viewer to "activate" them. Snickare’s example here is the Arch of Titus in Rome, erected in 81 AD.64 These exceptions do not, of course, contradict the fact that public art has undergone radical changes in recent decades. But to

understand this change, we need to look at not only the shifts in the political landscape, but also the entire art world. Sweden’s art world has undergone major changes since the art scene became increasingly global toward the end of the 20th century. This has meant, among other things, that places previously on the “margins” of the art world, such as the Nordic countries, have come into sharper focus and are suddenly portrayed as “art miracles,” as art theorist and curator Jonas Ekeberg has described it in his book Postnordisk.65

Globalization is one factor that in recent decades has led to changes in the art world. It has led, among other things, to a larger number of artists working with foreign actors/gallery owners and building their careers partly or entirely outside the Swedish art world. It is partly related to the fact that we now see many more graduate artists in the field. But it is also related to larger, even global structural changes. The local and the global exist side by side; as Indian Raqs Media Collective describes it: “To understand a place, any place, we have to think the world.”66

Local art scenes have also changed since the turn of the millennium. In Stockholm, Moderna Museet long served as an obvious hub for an art scene that otherwise consisted of a network of art galleries attracting new graduates and helping them build their careers. Today, exhibition activities are offered by several different types of commercial forces. Many new art spaces, such as Artipelag, Sven Harys and Fotografiska in Stockholm, have private owners, where funding is supplemented by conference facilities and restaurants. At the same time, several restaurants such as Wedholms and Sturehof are investing in art exhibitions. The line between art dealers, auction houses and gallery systems has been blurred by mixed forms, such as CF Hill and Arsenalsgatan 3 in Stockholm, both of which are run by former auctioneers and engage in both exhibition and valuation activities.

The boundaries of the classical art field, which has itself shifted to more alternative practices and is now shaped by various artist-driven initiatives, are also fluid. Many artists find alternative ways to shape their careers, with everything from artist-run initiatives to biennials in Sweden and abroad. Affiliation with a gallery is not a requirement or something an artist must pursue; many choose entirely different, often non-commercial paths. These shifts have led to a reassessment

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Renegotiations

of how artists view their public mission. Peter Hagdahl, an artist and curator at Public Art Agency Sweden, notes in an interview that “in the past, public art was perhaps a feeding ground that was a must, and something that was done maybe without much thought.”67 So if public art used to have an air of something not fully valued, since artists had to make compromises with respect to creative decisions and quality, today many more artists see this scene as an opportunity to create what they would otherwise never have been able to do, a unique chance to have the time and resources to develop a larger project. Though it may be a bit of a sweeping statement, Linda Fagerström describes the matter as follows: “[artists] see no difference between the expressions they use for public art and other types, nor any reason to define the difference – if there is one.”68 For the artist hoping to achieve success in his or her career, public commissions can be a key factor both in terms of funding and cultural capital.

An important prerequisite for this change is that there is now a greater breadth of artistic expression. In the conversation above, Peter Hagdahl describes how Public Art Agency Sweden has undergone major changes in recent years. This has also led to a shift in which artists and what kind of art the agency seeks out in its collaborations. Previously, there was “a group of artists who took up a lot of space on the public art scene.” Hagdahl goes on to say that while these artists were talented, they were not the artists he wanted to encourage to make public art. So, they began a process of bringing these “less obvious artistries into this context.”69

If this active rethinking has contributed to a greater variety of artistic expressions in Public Art Agency Sweden’s work, similar shifts are taking place on the private, regional and municipal levels. It can also be said that as a result many artists working with more traditional expressions have felt they are less in demand. Perhaps the elevated status of public art in the art field has also led to a discussion about another kind of gentrification, where another generation of artists,

68 Elisabeth Fagerström, “Plats, poetik och politik: Samtida konst i det offentliga rummet” [Place, Poetics and Politics: Contemporary art in the public space], Fagerström & Haglund op.cit., p. 16.
69 Hagdahl, ”Ett samtal om friktion på Statens konstråd” [A Conversation on Friction at Public Art Agency Sweden] p. 158.
adopting different practices, has made an older (more traditional) generation obsolete.

Today, it is not at all obvious that artists make a career out of the gallery system, or whether they even want to. Here, public art has been seen as an opportunity to explore issues with and for a completely different audience. As Claire Doherty notes, the participatory field rooted in Community Art has clearly broadened and been integrated into art as what she describes as a “vital working process for the democratization of art.” She goes on to note that this has also had an impact on public art: “Most notable changes include the commissioning of artists from the contemporary gallery sector employing media, materials, and processes previously thought unsuitable for the public realm, the incorporation of dynamic curatorial methods and the exchange of single-sited permanent outcomes in favor of dispersed interventions or cumulative, curated programs which evolve over space and time to remarkable structures which act as gathering points for a diverse temporary community.”

The renegotiated game plan: the art scene

Traditional art galleries and museums have also redefined their practices and sought greater engagement outside their own walls. An example of this shift came with the so-called New Institutionalism, a term coined by curator and critic Jonas Ekeberg in the first issue of the journal Verksted in 2003. The term was an attempt to capture a trend in which a number of art galleries had begun to adopt overtly self-reflexive and self-critical practices. In an issue of the online journal On Curating devoted to the phenomenon, Lucie Kolb and Gabriel Flückiger describe New Institutionalism as “institutions characterized by a focus on (critical) examination of the organization and disposition of art” and point to Palais de Tokyo in Paris, Kunstverein München and Rooseum in Malmö as examples.

In his doctoral thesis on artistic research, Danish curator Simon Sheikh describes New Institutionalism as an effect of the welfare state, or rather as a kind of lamentation over the dismantling of its institutions: “New Institutionalism was not only an attempt at finding new, progressive avenues for institutions to explore, rather than embracing the culture industry and the society of spectacle, but also retrospective

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Renegotiations and preserving, a cultural expression of the withering away of the welfare state.”72 There is something sad about this description, which is to some extent confirmed by the fact that many of the institutions that were considered to be the standard bearers of this new trend have disappeared or changed direction. Sheikh’s former colleague from NIFCA (another institution that practiced the same kind of self-critique), Nina Möntmann, noted in 2007 that most of the institutions brought under the umbrella of the concept had been recast or closed down: “Most of the institutions seem to have been put in their place like insubordinate teenagers.”73

At the same time, this turn toward self-critique continues to play a role outside these institutions. The semi-public museum space, which Möntmann described as a “hub for various transdisciplinary forms of collaborations,” is a definition that accurately describes how several county museums and art spaces across Sweden function today.74 We see examples of this in the long-standing involvement in urban planning. Konsthall C has already been mentioned in this regard, but one can also mention Marabouparken’s four-year involvement in the ParkLek project in which artist Kerstin Bergendal worked on a participatory project in Hallonbergen and Ör, in the municipality of Sundbyberg in the Stockholm region. We also see examples of this in several exhibition projects that occupy urban spaces and engage their audiences.

**The changing relationship between the public and public art**

In terms of both expression and ambition, public art has in recent decades moved toward more temporary interventions and engagements with users, all as a natural part of the process and/or work. We can examine several factors in relation to this shift. As we have seen, both the concept of art and the field of art have undergone significant changes, but the expectations placed on art have also changed. The notion of what art is and can be has broadened in many respects, thanks in large part to the fact that actors in the public art world have increased in

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number and have become professionalized. This is happening against a backdrop in which government policy has also shifted, settling on a more administrative role and marked by the “retrenchment” of the state (and all other forms of the commons) in recent decades.

Things used to be different. As sociologist Martin Gustavsson has shown, in the 1940s and 1950s the Swedish Art Council functioned not only as a purchaser of art, but also as a controller of the quality of art in general to “counteract inferior art.” Until 1953, for example, there was an import ban on “mediocre” art, as part of a drive to ensure authentic goods for the country’s population. This, in turn, was intended to strengthen democracy. It is a theme that persists to this day, albeit without the magisterial notion of ensuring quality, but with expectations for other qualities, such as “innovation.”

In Sweden and the other Nordic countries, access to the public space and public art have long been guaranteed, funded and defined by the state, region and municipality, that is, by the public. This applies to Sweden’s town squares and their role in the democratic process as gathering places and spaces for demonstration. It is also the case that this appeal to the public, where public art has long been seen as a natural part of public spaces, also requires the “public” to take responsibility for identifying and defending what the public space is.

This definition of public space (and public art) as more or less dependent on public funds has meant it is largely seen as the counterpart of the private, that is, the private understood as business and their commercial interests. The 1974 cultural policy bill set eight sub-objectives, all of which attempted to define, in more general terms, the level at which cultural policy should operate. The bill sought to adopt general rather than detailed approaches. As evident in the most widely known objective, stipulating that “cultural policy shall counteract the negative effects of commercialism in the field of culture,” it pursued a clear agenda.

In the wording of the cultural policy bill of 1996, the state showed its preference. The same wording remains from the 1996 bill, but it has

76 Ibid., pp. 166ff.
been expanded to “promote cultural diversity, artistic renewal and quality.”79 The motivation given for retaining the wording is that the negative effects of commercialization lead to “homogenization, dilution and centralization, but also in growing gaps between different people and groups.”80 However, the objective was removed from the 2009 center-right bill, “Time for Culture”, on the grounds that it is not relevant to identify cultural activities carried out on a commercial basis as “primarily harmful or negative and therefore something we need to work against.”81

The wording of the various cultural policy bills describes different positional shifts in terms of culture and the public sphere as well as in society in general. We saw a shift from a relatively politically radical Social Democratic government in 1974 to a more liberal government in 1996, which culminates with the government of the center-right Alliance.82 However, the policy change is not only characterized by the changing fortunes of different political parties, but also by a general move toward neo-liberal values, along with Sweden’s entry into the EU in 1995. If the 1974 cultural policy bill is characterized by the ‘will’ of the state, it is also an expression of what Foucault in Discipline and Punish called the disciplining of society in which the idea of a ‘public’-controlled public space plays an important role.83 Similarly, the 2009 bill can be seen as a step toward the situation described by Gilles Deleuze in the often-quoted text “Postscript on the Societies of Control.” In this work, Deleuze responds to Foucault’s theories and argues that the society of discipline is being succeeded by what he calls a society of control, in which human beings are controlled by technologies, rather than by an explicit “will” of the state.84

It is thus not entirely clear how we are to understand the political “pull-back” described by Jeff Werner, among others. On the one hand, it can be seen as a lack of political initiative, on the other, as the absence of a political agenda of discipline, which can also be described in

79 Ibid., p. 27.
80 Ibid., p. 29.
81 Government bill 2009/10:3 p. 28.
82 For a discussion of the changes in cultural policy since the 1960s, see Bengt Jacobsson, Kulturpolitik: styrning på avstånd [Bengt Jacobsson, Cultural Policy: Arm’s length governance] (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2014).
84 Gilles Deleuze, “Postskriptum om kontrollsamhället” [Postscript on Societies of Control], trans. Sven-Olov Wallenstein, in Nomadologin (Stockholm: Raster, 1998).
terms of increased freedom and a greater reliance on the citizens’ own preferences. Architectural theorist Sofia Wiberg, for example, notes that there has been a shift in community planning in recent decades, from expert-led to dialogue “with the ideal that planning should be done in dialogue, together with citizens and other actors in the community development sector.”85 And as Joanna Zawieja, curator at Public Art Agency Sweden, says in a conversation to be published in the summary of the project Art is Happening: “Just to clarify that it is not the case that the ‘Public Art Agency Sweden comes in and enlightens civil society’ about what art is. It’s a process that happens on many different levels.”86

**Participation: the institution, the audience and listening**

As we have already seen, many argue that the artist should have a presence earlier in the process and a presence in the space itself. Another key aspect is how the artwork/artist/curator will engage the viewer, which is in line with the notion that a piece of art should not simply manifest a certain truth and present it to the residents. Here, art scholar Mechtild Widrich sees a shift from the more confrontational practice of traditional, countercultural performance toward what she calls “performative monuments.” Her study aims to reveal what this shift looks like: “I will show how the contemporary monument does not ‘tell’ political facts, but engages the audience in forming new ones.”87 Where Widrich describes the way contemporary performance approaches issues that have previously been associated with monuments, Lena From, project manager for Art is Happening, draws conclusions about participatory work and permanence, where Public Art Agency Sweden and its selected artists engaged in many conversations with residents

and met a greater expectation for permanent works as a result of the dialogue.90 In other words, the fact that the process is opened up “early” to both artists and users does not mean that the outcome will be a temporary, participatory event. On the contrary, in the best case, it contributes to a de-anonymization of the viewer. According to Annika Wik, it is about “a change in viewing positions that involves a shared physical experience, and ultimately an experience that does not imply the same distance as before but that could be described as closer or from inside the art experience. The focus on the experience of the audience, spectatorship, and reception, also means, as Sobchack and others show, an interesting theoretical shift from an abstract viewer to a specific individual viewer.”91

However, participatory processes have not always been seen as a necessarily positive feature. In a highly critical and skeptical text, architect Markus Miessen writes that “[p]articipation has become a radical chic, one that is en vogue with politicians who want to make sure that, rather than producing critical content, the tool itself becomes what is supposed to be read as criticality.”92 Miessen is responding to a scenario where the participatory process itself is given neither time nor space to have any significance, where the situation as such becomes a hostage to larger forces.

As we saw earlier, Borén and Craig were able to identify a number of reasons why art needs to be included early in the process. When it comes to the viewer/recipient/participant, the issue is a little different. Sofia Wiberg adopted an approach that attempted to shift the focus from what is said in citizen dialogues and similar contexts to a focus on listening. It is not only when someone enters a process that is important, but also how they are listened to. In her practice, Wiberg has often found that the citizen dialogues in which she has participated have been deemed “successful” as long as the leaders got the answers they were looking for. Unconsciously, they were not attuned to listening to other voices but were focused on hearing what they themselves thought they would hear.93

88 From Konst Händer [Art is Happening] op.cit., p. 9.
89 Annika Wik, “Vieweing Positions Here and There” in Imagining the Audience, Malm & Wik eds., op.cit., p. 39.
91 Sofa Wiberg, Lyssnandets praktik. Medborgardialog, icke-vetande och förskjutningar [The Practice of Listening. Civil dialogue, unknowing and displacement], doctoral theses, (Stockholm:
The question of the potential utility of public art in an era when it is not defined by a clear “will” or agent is, as we have seen, a complex matter that places high demands on commissioning bodies and practitioners alike. Perhaps the greatest challenge ahead lies precisely in listening – how to listen and what to listen to. Whether we are thinking of “traditional” art objects or not, it is a matter of finding a system that listens to commissioning bodies, recipients and practitioners, but also of finding ways of knowing when the dialogue can or should be limited – such as when artistic integrity is at risk of being compromised.