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Theories and Practices of Public Art Midterm Exam

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1. **Give your thoughts on the ‘Tilted Arc Controversy’. Utilize arguments of arts and artists suggested by theorists such as Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Foucault, and others discussed during the class.**

‘The Tilted Arc’ by Richard Serra seemed to be a heavily divided work of art for the sole reason that it questioned the ethics and policies upon which a piece of artwork should be constructed. Certainly, the aesthetic and artistic freedom of the artists is of premium importance, but it should also take into consideration the *visual* freedom of the general public as well. This particular statement relating to visual freedom could both be negated and supported by a number of theorists and artists but let us first start with the primary theory and definition of what it means to be a *public art.*

In effect when an artist makes his or her piece of work, they *choose* to make their artwork public and in turn, choose to agree to the unwritten, societal clauses of what it entails to be public. According to the standard dictionary definition, the meaning of public could be interpreted in various ways but the main point of it all focuses on it “affecting the community” and being “open to the judgement of all.” Thus, the rational ‘dictionary’ approach to the “Tilted Arc Controversy” involves the opinion of both the surrounding and affected community in addition to the artist. Even German philosopher , Jurgen Habermas seems to support this definition by arguing that the position of the public sphere should be based on equally guided conversations between the artists and the surrounding community. He even seemed to argue against the practice of government or monarchal system saturating their visiting community with images of burdensome art. Curiously, this argument seems to fall quite in place with the case of the Tilted Arc because Richard Serra was commissioned by the United States General Services Administration Art-in-Architecture program and *did*  seem to block the passageway and kind of burden the senses of the onlookers.

In that sense, Serra’s art did challenge the beliefs and teachings of many great ancient philosophers such as Aristotle who firmly believed in art being a medium of “delight” and a form of education for the public. Kant, seemed to take an entirely opposing and more modernistic opinion, citing that art should be, in nature, *autonomous.* It should be unrestrained from social and moral order because the artistic taste of every individual varies. According to Kant, art will always be subjective and not governed by “general proofs or concepts.” Plato, in turn, seems to lean towards the philosophical dynamic of Aristotle but not fully because he does seem to emphasize the ‘delight’ of the public. Plato’s focus, however, lies in the importance of artistic education where in ideal circumstances, both the artist and the public gain happiness and wisdom through making and seeing artistic expression.

All of these theories, personally seem to hold their own weight in their own right because I do agree with the sentiment that art should have an educational point as well as not be overwhelming to the senses. At the same time, I do agree with Kant’s opinion of art being free because I do find art to be best made when it is unrestricted in its expression. Certainly, I do feel that a certain middle ground could be reached where a certain set of educational policies could be implemented where art is not particularly overburdening and does not fully eliminate the tax money of the public.

In that regard, I believe I would most agree with Foucault’s concern with cities being controlled (and therefore oppressed). In order for the control to be equally divided, the artist must make artwork that is both emotionally and educationally satisfying for himself and the public because with knowledge, the onslaught of power is inevitable. I truly believe that it would be in the best interests of the people if they were given small, non-street obstructing pieces of art by various artists to increase their knowledge like Plato and Aristotle wished instead of pouring all their money on a piece of art that emotionally oppresses the public because that artwork would simply not breed positive educational emotions for artistic expression.

1. **Give your thoughts on “monumental” public art in terms of its weakness and strength in representing communities. Take at least once example.**

In practice, “monumental” public art is a very perplexing piece of artwork for it borders as an architectural job but at the same time, implies and expects the artistic expression of a painting or a minute sculpture. Indeed, I do personally think that both the architectural and life size aspect of monumental public art makes it already so complicated for the artist to make. However, the additional burden of it being able to represent the community in which it is being sculpted or targeted requires an extremely precarious balance of free personal artistic expression and community empathy.

Certainly, if we are considering monumental art pieces, it is important to keep in mind the setting, weather, materials and even the traffic of the area. All of these considerations require extensive research into the monumental public art building site to understand and prepare for the reactions of the surrounding community. Some people might argue against this sentiment by citing philosophers like Kant who encouraged free artistic expression regardless of the community because an artist cannot hope to objective, please the majority of the public in every case.

However, the simple rebuttal to this argument would be the fact that this monumental art is built using the tax money of the surrounding community and is also not usually just built by a single person even if it is designed by one. Thus, the opinions of the public will hold even more weightage since this art should be functionally beneficial or at least emotionally moving because it is made using the sacrifices of the general public.

If we look at the great Egyptian pyramids as a classic example of monumental sculptures, we can clearly see both the benefits and weakness of such artwork. Even though the pyramids look esthetically pleasing, the question of environmental and human sustainability occurs. The pyramids required vast amounts of labor and some archaeologists even claimed that forced labor must have been needed to construct such an arduous monumental sculpture. In addition, when constructing the sculpture, the Egyptians even considered the inner area of the sculpture for it was mainly built for the safe passageway for the Egyptian pharaohs to afterlife.

The only ones who actually benefited from this labor , thus , would be the dead Egyptian rulers which in turn creates the question of a power imbalance Foucault kept warning us about. Like Habermas points out , art should not exist to overwhelm the viewer and in this case, the public viewers were not only overwhelmed but also financially bereft of the sources that could have gone to them. This issue becomes even more serious when we consider that precious jewels and resources were poured into the pyramids for their construction.

Even if we allow modern art policies that are applied like in the case of La Defense where buildings are not allowed to be constructed higher than 37m and underground transportation and pedestrians are not affected, the question of the monumental public art maintaining its own distinctive expression is very convoluted. Case in point could be the Red Spider by Alexander Calder which seeks to evoke a circus tributary theme but personally the monumental public art feels more like a normal sculpture than an artistic monument.

However, public art pieces like the great wall of Los Angeles seek to evoke the true memory and mission of monumental public art. I found the idea of teaching and uniting children from different ethnic and financial backgrounds into a 350 feet mural to be an impressive and enriching experience both for the public and the artists in question.

Therefore, I strongly believe that a delicate balance is needed when constructing monumental pieces because too many cultural policies might render that art piece devoid of its magnificence and no policies like the pyramid would render the public distraught over its financial resources.