

SPECIAL ISSUE: THE ARTS IN PLACE

AN INTRODUCTION

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In April 2007, eight scholars gathered at the Rockefeller Archive Center in Sleepy Hollow, NY, to talk about the “arts in place.” Or out of place. Or no place. Or everywhere. Such was the wide-ranging conversation that began with the objective to ground the arts in time, in locale, and ended by questioning the premise of the workshop itself, perhaps a typical conclusion. The essays in this volume represent the range of the debate that I hope will introduce social historians to the possibilities of research in the arts and spark questions that continue to unsettle conclusions. As an area of study, the arts have received attention primarily from scholars working in particular genres: visual art is studied by art historians; film by film scholars; museums by sociologists; music by musicologists. This workshop was conceived as an opportunity to consider the arts outside of the boundaries of genre with the question of place providing another kind of lens through which to examine the arts’ power and specificity.

As the location at the Rockefeller Archives might indicate, the arts remain a privileged endeavor. Voluminous documents at the archives prove the important philanthropic role that the Rockefeller family has played in the arts throughout the twentieth century, from the founding of the Museum of Modern Art and the development of Lincoln Center to the sponsorship of arts organization around the country and the world. That influence has also tended to reinforce the exclusive role of the arts in society, even though many of the organizations that benefited from Rockefeller philanthropy were small, community-based organizations. The arts may be so ensconced in the realm of elites that studying them is at odds with the principles that founded and continue to spur the work of social history. Compounding their selective position in society, the arts of modernity reside between the public and private, an individual vision – often abstruse and mysterious – that becomes an encounter with someone else. This personal, subjective relationship between an art product, object, or performance and a viewer has been a subject of study by philosophers, theorists, and art historians, but remains less studied and contextualized by social historians, given the tight focus on individual experience in encounters with art. What has received attention is the production of the arts, particularly in the realm of popular culture – the biographical shape of artists’ work; questions of identity (individual, social, national, global); and cultural impact and meanings. This sway toward popular culture has aligned with social historians’ concern since the 1970s to shift attention from the “top” to the “bottom” to recognize more people in the making of the past. This has resulted in relatively little attention to the “high” arts or the fraught, subjective encounter between person and object that serves as the basis of the arts, wherever on the changing high-low spectrum.

If social historians considered the “high” arts, what would a “bottom-up” view look like? There are some common emphases: a focus on revealing the embedded

social forces at play, such as economics, racialization, politics, and nationalism; attempts to look beyond individual artists or artworks to examine audience members, government officials, arts administrators, and institutions; and a politics of the everyday beyond that of a political machinery or the elite classes. Perhaps most important, however, what may distinguish a social history perspective on the arts is the range of sources and evidence looked at and considered: census data; surveys; oral histories; snippets of remembrances; photographs; maps; design plans; internal institutional documents; a range of media sources beyond the most widely read. While imprecise, this list is indicative of the breadth that social historians have sought in scouring many and often seemingly unrelated sources. Widening the lens, including more people, more perspectives, and broader impact: these are the principles that have long propelled social history.

But there may remain a limit to what historians of the arts can uncover and how broad a perspective we can provide. If trying to grasp any vestige of a dance from 1927 is difficult, the challenges in finding what people beyond the performers, media commentators, and experts experienced about that dance can be insurmountable. This means using evidence that can reinforce the power and voice of elites or looking at representations that hint at larger popular opinion rather than prove it, an approach more in line with cultural than social history. Looking at the arts may inevitably blur the boundaries between social and cultural history, and essays in this volume fall within that spectrum; some attempt to chart a more widespread impact of the arts through reception and demographic shifts, others focus on production or representation. The articles, then, work at the evolving intersection of social and cultural history, an approach that matches the topic. The arts need both a detailed examination of production and reception (where possible) as well as a broader assessment of impact: they exist both as a social reality and an imagined one. As product and representation, object and image, the arts demand methodological crossing.

These essays demonstrate both the impact of social history on our understanding of the arts and point to ways in which social history is being altered by such an examination. In particular, the articles highlight the use of the visual and spatial elements of sources. The methodological challenge that emerged in our workshop was to match art historians' skill at visual and spatial analysis with social historians' search for and immersion in variety and range in evidence. To me, this was one of the more exciting aspects of the workshop as there is much talk about a visual and spatial "turn" to historical inquiry and yet little attempt to utilize and capitalize upon other scholars' abilities in these techniques of analysis. If challenges remain about how to research the social aspects of looking and occupying space in the past, then the arts provide both cross-disciplinary opportunities to learn techniques as well as a realm of experience bound to visual and spatial dynamics that can be a springboard for examinations of these elements in other areas of society.

Recent scholarship has predominantly viewed the arts as markers of identity. Because the arts are so tied to subjectivity – in production or reception – this link to identity will likely not go away, nor should it. But the essays in this collection show that identity battles rarely encapsulate all that the arts encompass. Emphasizing the context in which the arts are made can re-focus our attention to the processes of identity-making that are inherently social; examining the arts in and out of place brings these processes to the fore. The relationship of identity

to context politicizes art, intrinsically and irrevocably. These questions have been well explored by scholars examining museums as well as public art. Carol Duncan, Steven Conn, and Alan Wallach have looked at the role museums assume in society, as intellectual projects as well as institutional ones enveloped in dynamics of power. Some of the work, such as that by Duncan, involves an understanding of museums in particular places, similar to the aims of essays in this volume. But the scholarship best exposes the battles of what constitutes art and who benefits by such definitions.¹ This perspective propels investigations of public art as well, although the art itself – usually set somewhere quite specific – raises many of the issues that authors in this volume examine.² Scholars in museum studies and public art have initiated valuable research into the social dynamics of the arts, although they retain a focus on objects, whether the museum or a painting, particularly in the domain of visual arts.

Adding location to these questions depends upon seeing space as a sphere of social production, an effort begun by theorists such as Jürgen Habermas, Henri Lefebvre, and David Harvey who have marked the importance of space in discussions of political and collective power.³ Urban studies scholars, in particular, have built upon this insight by making a distinction between place and space as a difference between community and capital, between the habits of interaction and communication that may lead to strong human bonds and the forces of commodification and commercialism that may alienate those sentiments. How the arts intersect with these questions has prompted varying arguments. Dolores Hayden helped define and detail this intersection, arguing for the power of the arts to make place matter, to inscribe often unrecognized histories in the urban landscape. But art historians such as Miwon Kwon see site-specific art that has developed since the 1970s as contributing to an appropriation of space by elites, turning certain spaces into cultural commodities that uphold class distinctions and inequalities, an argument that follows the work of sociologist Sharon Zukin and her view of the cultures of cities.⁴ The essays in this collection subscribe not so much to a position about the negative or positive aspects of the arts in place but to the indelible effect of the arts in the process of place-making.

The questions asked and methods employed in this volume put the arts into daily lives, from their impact in cities to their role in transmuting the foreign. In fact, the essays expose the intertwining of urban and international issues in the arts throughout the 20th century. One collection of essays emphasizes the urban elements, the other, the international. These two forces, and their overlapping, display the transnational reach of the arts, and makes the question of place that much more salient in determining specificity and force.

The essays of Mark Tebeau, Ben Looker, Alison Isenberg, and myself address the tie between cities and the arts overtly. In Cleveland, San Francisco, and New York, a sculpture, gardens, performing arts institutions, and the debates about what constitutes a neighborhood, reveal social tensions of race, gender, ethnicity, and class. These battles were entwined with changing demographics, urban renewal successes and failures, and ongoing debates over urban design. Mark Tebeau's century-long look at Cleveland's Cultural Gardens highlights the waves of involvement and neglect that characterized the place, tracing the meaning of these gardens for different ethnic populations of the city as groups moved into and out of the city limits. International forces form the city debate. By looking at the gardens as art, Tebeau reminds us of the ways in which aesthetic experiences

are inscribed in the urban landscape, operating on a more subtle level than the formality of a sculpture or institution relays. He presents situations in which art helped alleviate confrontations and then, decades later, infused them. The changing relevancy of the gardens to the city gives a dynamic view of how art has contributed to conceptions of the city, making, for some, Cleveland matter. In contrast to the sweeping view Tebeau offers, Ben Looker pierces the concept of the “neighborhood” in the 1940s. He mines journalistic, literary, and theatrical sources for the ways in which they bring forth and create an imaginary place that is at once quite specific – a block, a street, a collection of dwellings – and mythical – a community, a sense of belonging, the foundation of national pride and strength. If Tebeau sees time evolving in place in the Cleveland gardens, Looker sees the arts encapsulating a specific moment, one between a nostalgic vision of an ethnic village and the halcyon view of the suburbs to come. By bringing together social scientists, activists, novelists, and theater people, Looker demonstrates how “artistic imagination grounds itself in the material and social”; the neighborhood served as “both setting and symbol, an art in place and an art of place.” These essays set forth the spectrum upon which the collection rests: from widespread impact of the arts’ definition of a specific spot in a city to a deep investigation of the ways in which the arts create the imaginary element of a place that drives our daily interactions.

The essays by Alison Isenberg and myself delve into the intertwining of urbanization and the arts in more concrete form in the 1950s and ‘60s. Isenberg looks at the controversy surrounding the fountain sculpture of Ghirardelli Square in San Francisco and brings out its gendered elements: the female sculptor at odds with the male urban designer; representational sculpture depicting breast-feeding mermaids; and the public responses to these elements that related to perceptions of the surrounding neighborhood of North Beach and the city overall. Isenberg’s essay details the complex ways in which not only concepts of femininity and motherhood were made and revealed by the controversy but also the field and practice of urban design. In the arts it featured – the fountain, fine dining, design — Ghirardelli Square posed an alternative to the dominant form of urban renewal in razing and then rising of skyscrapers with its focus on preservation, commercial development, and public plazas. Much as Isenberg shows how the arts of Ghirardelli Square are fused to its place, I examine the development of Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in Manhattan and the revitalization of the Brooklyn Academy of Music in Brooklyn for a comparative look at two performing arts institutions in one city. My essay examines not only the form of these institutions and their effects on particular neighborhoods but how those elements impacted the arts on display. This intra-city comparison shows the aggrandizing pull of the international arena in the shaping of Lincoln Center and the arts it featured in contrast to the local focus and debate that transformed how BAM fit into its Brooklyn neighborhood. The performing arts, bound as they are to a moment fused in space and time, reveal the making of place within grandiose formal buildings as well as outside on the streets that surround them – and it is, perhaps, that tensile connection that informs their relevancy. The cases of these institutions and Ghirardelli Square uncover the central role that the arts played in re-making cities in the mid-20th century. At a time when the suburbs pulled more and more people, the arts provided a counterforce, reinforcing their tie to cities, as magnet and stimulus.

Sarah Schrank's essay bridges the close look at the arts' placement in city life of the first section with the emphasis on effects of international forces of the second section. Los Angeles of the 1930s captures both themes. Examining a city tied to image-making and a place that attracted both international visitors and immigrants, Schrank looks at the production, erasure, and recent re-emergence of murals and monuments produced by three artists during the period. She traces the political debate that public art inspired, particularly in how confrontational perspectives about U.S. imperialist quests and the plight of Mexican workers clashed with urban boosterism, and argues that "civic efforts to project a specific sense of place globally resulted in radical reinterpretations of place locally." The artists in Schrank's essay emphasized the historical and spatial context in which they produced their work, engaging in a dynamic social critique of the local by bringing to bear the perspectives of the foreign, the immigrant, and the ethnic. Static forms of art such as painting and sculpture may resist the changing dynamics of place that the effervescent performing arts and living gardens inhabit, but Schrank shows how time affected these genres as well, in the creation and erasure of murals and unsentimental persistence of the Watts Towers. Schrank lays bare a fundamental principle that underlies the collection: how people use art to make one's own place in the city meaningful.

This is an issue that Fabiana Serviddio also takes up in the vexed case of the exhibition and perception of Latin American art in the U.S. Serviddio looks at organizations that have featured art from the region, focusing in particular on the Center for Inter-American Relations, largely funded by the Rockefeller family, and located on the Upper East Side of Manhattan in the same building as the business-oriented Council of the Americas. The places in which Latin American art appeared were predominantly those with either overt or covert political associations, and the artworks selected presented a more imaginary view of the region, less tied to contemporary concerns and evocative of either the pre-Columbian past or an exoticized mythical place. The predominance of these organizations, Serviddio argues, has skewed not only the perception of Latin American art but also its place in art history. Images of the foreign also structure Glenn Reynolds's examination of missionary films of Central Africa produced in the interwar period. Like the artwork and organizations examined by Serviddio, the films that Reynolds looks at demonstrate the endurance of outsider images of other places. Reynolds focuses on production in the field, though, to move beyond the common view of these movies as only hegemonic instruments. Using a diary of a filmmaker in the Congo in the 1930s, he shows the extent to which the BaKuba participated in shaping their images in these films and, especially, in understanding the power of representation. The constant daily negotiations necessary for filming became embedded in the images — even if they ended up as colonizing tools. Both Latin American art and films of Central Africa transferred images of foreign places to the U.S. that reflected their production; the setting in which they were seen then altered their perception. That transmutation, more often into a view that was not amenable to artists from those places, prompted the push for more control over arts and images in the liberation from colonialism. If the fate of the Mexican muralist David Siqueiros in Los Angeles was erasure, the arts of Latin America and Africa continue to combat the enduring out-of-place images that still haunt our understanding of these places.

While Schrank, Serviddio, and Reynolds show how an art of one place functions in another, Julie Nicoletta looks at how the arts reside awkwardly within the temporary World's Fairs. By examining the New York World's Fair of 1964-65, Nicoletta locates art in a more contemporary realm, that of the global market. The effects of capitalism and commercialization emerge blatantly in the fairs, perhaps nowhere more notably than in the fashioning of Michelangelo's *Pietà* into a populist spectacle. And the setting in New York of the fair exacerbated this populist frame of the arts, partly by creating stiff competition in competing aesthetic offerings but also by failing to connect more directly to the arts of the city. Given the embedding of the arts in cityscapes and processes of urbanization that are examined in previous essays, the dislocation of the art in the fair highlights the fluidity and exchange of place in the commercial context. While the fair may have helped stir the growing trend toward "blockbuster" shows in museums, it also featured contributions of newly independent nations emerging from colonialism. It gave these nations a global stage on which to present aesthetic treasures that were being used to form a nascent national identity. The convergence of this process with the rise of the global market, particularly in the arts, has made the transmutation of foreign peoples and places in the U.S. both more common and more hazy.

Although many essays examine how the arts produce places, whether real or imagined, Nicoletta is the only one to look more specifically at the commercial aspects of this process. Most of the articles follow the paradigm of place set out by urban studies scholars, looking at the ways in which the arts forge bonds (or not) but not investigating the commodifying aspects of this process. Nicoletta, however, suggests ways in which this silence of scholars of the arts on these issues came about: by events such as the world's fairs that helped construct the divide between art and spectacle that defines much of the art worlds. It is an increasingly common political tactic amongst arts advocates to argue for the importance of the arts by acclaiming the economic strength of the "cultural sector," a more specific extension of the civic boosterism that underlaid the public art in Los Angeles of the 1930s as well as the urban renewal projects of Ghirardelli Square and Lincoln Center. These essays, in fact, counter that dominant approach, insisting on a broader view of the effects and significance of the arts. Nicoletta reminds us not only of the commercial aspect but also that we need to know better how the connection between the arts, economic growth, and commodification came about – with world's fairs and artistic projects in urban renewal as obvious markers within that development.

The arts spark debate, now and then, often around matters of elitism, populism, and egalitarianism. They meddle directly with the role of an individual vision in the wider society. But they have never been an entirely elitist realm and recovering the vestiges of the debates in the past can make us attentive to the reasons this perception remains so dominant. Social historians have an opportunity to insist on the social aspect of the arts, not only in research that emphasizes these concerns but also in drawing the wider public into conversations about issues the arts inspire, whether it be neglected gardens or museums, traveling exhibitions, or outdoor sculptures. More important, as Benjamin Looker shows most overtly, the arts have been a place where the tremors of social ambivalences are often seen first. As the essays in this volume argue, it is not so much that an individual genius articulates that shift – Kurt Vonnegut's canary in the coal mine

– but rather that the imaginative play of the arts, in creation and interpretation, allows for new forces to emerge. At not yet the strength of a trend but more than the whisper of a suggestion, the arts – as collective, social practice — yield insights of disturbance, change, and ambivalence, both now and in the past.

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ENDNOTES

I would like to thank the staff of the Rockefeller Archive Center for their hard work and attention to detail in putting together this workshop so that all we had to do was show up and talk. In particular, I am grateful to Darwin Stapleton, former Executive Director, for his encouragement; to the participants for the generous, warm, and lively spirit that exemplified the joy of intellectual work; to Peter Stearns, Rebecca Zurier, and Karen Coleman for their editorial work; and to Carol Sturz at this journal for her help in shepherding the essays to publication. A note of clarification: two original participants of the workshop (Annabel Wharton and Karen Coleman) were unable to include their essays, so I solicited two articles from scholars with interest in these questions (Glenn Reynolds and Sarah Schrank).

1. Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (New York, 1995) and *The Aesthetics of Power: Essays in the Critical Art History* (Cambridge, 1993); Steven Conn, *Museums and American Intellectual Life, 1876-1926* (Chicago, 2000); Alan Wallach, *Exhibiting Contradiction: Essays on the Art Museum in the United States* (Amherst, 1998).
2. Some seminal works in public art include Harriet Senie, *Critical Issues in Public Art: Content, Context, and Controversy* (New York, 1992); Erika Doss, *Spirit Poles and Flying Pigs: Public Art and Cultural Democracy in American Communities* (Washington DC, 1995); Casey Nelson Blake, ed., *The Arts of Democracy: Art, Public Culture, and the State* (Philadelphia, 2007).
3. To cite only the most prominent of these scholars' work on these issues: Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962); Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (1974); David Harvey, *Social Justice and the City* (1973).
4. Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes and Public History* (Cambridge, 1995); Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, 2002); Sharon Zukin, *The Cultures of Cities* (Oxford, 1995). See also Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge, 1998); Malcolm Miles, *Art, Space, and the City: Public Art and Urban Futures* (New York, 1997); and Tom Finkelpearl, *Dialogues in Public Art* (Cambridge, 2000).

