

## **Spatial Confessions On the Question of Instituting the Public**

### **The Speaking Part**

For the stage for one of his farewell speeches two months before resigning from the post of prime minister and leader of the labour party, Tony Blair chose the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, thereby addressing the Tate Modern as the apogee of success in the decade of New Labour and mirroring the "art gains" of hugely increased visitor numbers thanks to the free admission policy, which, in Blair's words, made 'museums feel different', that is, 'confident, assertive, creative and live'. By no means is it at odds with the liberal democratic heritage of the public sphere for the outgoing leader to deliver the Culture and Creativity Report in 2007 in a museum of contemporary art. In stating that 'the way the cultural sector develops is crucial to the way the country develops', Blair reminds us of the formation of the bourgeois public sphere in the nineteenth century via public institutions as spaces of public assembly that civilise the crowd by way of polite and rational debate.

As Tony Bennett demonstrated in his seminal study *The Birth of Museum* (1995), the modern museum's instruction of the public is, among other functions, an instrument for managing social behaviour. Ever since it was established, the liberal democratic public sphere exercises the capacity of individuals to internalise and perpetuate the techniques of self-monitoring the performative aspects of their conduct. If the public is instilled and rehearsed *by* performance, where actions, words, deeds, gestures and bodily movements of citizens count as an aesthetic and performative mode of ideology in public space, then, we might ask, what is distinctive about the 'performances' of the public in art institutions today? In what terms do museums of contemporary art, by welcoming performing arts into its spaces or fusing media in spectacular immersive environments, conceive of public space as a condition for the public sphere?

While modern museums sought to differentiate the public by specializing and classifying knowledge into so many varieties of expertise, the neoliberal turn in cultural policy aligns contemporaneity with openness, inclusiveness and multicultural diversity as well as a synchronic presentism of the visitors' experience within the focus of the contemporary art institutions' mission. Museums of contemporary art aren't alone in this. They reflect broader changes in the current (Post-Fordist) form of capitalism, whose immaterial products are experiences and expressions of subjectivity. The significant shift from the auratic contemplation of the object to the participation in performance, situation, event or (learning) environment, featured as a key term in the policy of institutions, doesn't mean that the public operates on more collectivist than individualist grounds. There is an uneasy yet intriguing sense of ambivalence to be reflected upon regarding the position of the visitor who is inducted into the museal performance and its vast open public spaces: what kind of publicness is implicated by masses of visitors encouraged to develop a 'personal perspective' or creative, self-expressive response? A supersized venue of postindustrial architecture like the Turbine Hall can at once

appear as a site of carnivalisation with a festival-like temporality of events and a domesticated playground of family activities. But it can also be an empty stage, the idleness of which inspires a flashmob or even a political action. The constant refashioning of the appearance of such public spaces, from being a container of monumental sculpture to resembling a public plaza, from acting as a performance stage to symbolising a shelter, raises the question of the potential of deregulated, purposeless openness. Claire Bishop has recently argued in favor of museum practices that present their visitors with 'arguments and positions to read or contest' (*Radical Museology*, 2013), which seems to revive the demand for political discursive publicness in the museum. The privatisation of the cultural sector, which introduces corporate logic and funding into public institutions, often under the fiscal imperative of economic sustainability, aids in the dismantling of the political commitment to art as a public good. In the wake of protests and riots, which can be witnessed as feeble signs of the rise of a politically bewildered public, we might also ask how, in which political and aesthetic terms and techniques from the varying positions and perspectives of artists, curators, critics, theorists and cultural workers, do public institutions of contemporary art partake in a more political, discursive public sphere.

Saturday the 24<sup>th</sup> of May will feature a day of talks, debates, film screenings and commentaries addressing the questions above as the "speaking part" of a week-long programme that includes choreographic experiments in the Turbine Hall and a performance in the BMW Tate Live room. An opportunity to think out loud together in a setting less formal than a conference.

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