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Mediating Integration Through Public and Socially Engaged Art Practices for Recent Immigration in Italy: Government or Artist as Mediator? Recommendations on a "Third Level."

Abstract:

The problem of tragic peripheries and immigration issues is becoming more relevant in different regions of the world, areas unaccustomed to this phenomenon in such a dimension. The recent riots in the Parisien *banlieux* sparked a European-wide discussion among politicians about these emergencies and their threat to the social order. The dissatisfaction of the immigrants, however, cannot be mitigated without understanding the process of integrating immigrants through other tools, including artistic practices instead of relying entirely on immigrant laws. Some countries, including the United States, have had longer experience with such issues, while others are just beginning to confront them.

That is why the study of international cases of public art practices used to solve social conflict is central in order to explore the issue of immigrant integration through public art in countries that are new to this phenomenon. Italy is one of them and its case is representative of the Southern European countries. Italy's situation encourages a discussion about the nature of the relationship between public art- intended here as public practice and as a tool for communities- and immigration.

This research begins a novel exploration on how public art practices can be employed to foster the integration of immigrants and what is the role of the government and artists in reaching out to the immigrant community. The concrete point of departure for the research has been the "progetto Zingonia," the only project thus far with the explicit aim to integrate immigrants in Italy. However, an account limited only to this project and to the Italian experience on public art, would not allow recommendations for further development. In need of inspiration and insight, the popular American experience involving art to facilitate immigrant integration is not appropriate for many reasons. The

more extreme case of South Africa appeared to be much more interesting: in particular, the work of the Dutch artist René Klarenbeek in Mamelodi, South Africa (1997). The notion of context, in particular referring to audience and space will be relevant to set the agenda for possible areas of improvements in countries new to this problem, like Italy.

As far as methodology, statistical data on immigration in Italy support the importance of the issue. Then, to shed light on this topic, the general public art literature and more specifically, the contextual approach are considered. The topics discussed consider the role of the government in commissioning public art, the type of message the public administration seeks to convey, the choice of the artistic approach and the relations with the local authority's power structure. To be able to do this, the public art project is analyzed in relation to the context in which it is created. The notion of audience is explored: who is speaking and who is being heard? It's important to determine who is the interlocutor of the immigrant audience: the artist, public administrator, or the cultural mediator. Second, the notion of space, both real and figurative, is considered. This debate helps understanding the way the work is perceived by the immigrants. The notions of "third space" and "in-between" of Homi Bhabha, together with the analysis of Annie Coombes, are key in understanding how the public art project in South Africa can provide suggestions for the Italian situation.

The comparison of the two cases helps question the main characteristics of the Italian case: the role of the artist versus the role of the government in reaching out to the immigrant community. Finally, it will be shown how the Italian case is representative of a situation shared by other countries, which are experiencing social conflicts among immigrants and the resident population and are attempting to employ public art to attenuate these problems.

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In an increasingly globalized world, immigration issues are affecting different regions of the world, areas previously unaccustomed to this phenomenon. The recent riots in the Parisian *banlieux* sparked a European-wide discussion and analysis of these emergencies and their threat to the social order. Some Western European countries, particularly in Southern Europe, which had experienced minimal influxes of immigrants, are now addressing the issue of how to heal social conflicts. This raises questions around the nature of integration. The idea of employing artistic practices to ease integration has recently been formulated and is gaining momentum in light of these circumstances. At a more profound level, culture not only provides a resource in the form of artistic practice, but also ways for understanding and experiencing difference.

For countries that are new to implementing arts projects in the context of social reform, the study of similar practices in other countries could be fruitful. Even though the number of such projects around the world is increasing, we still lack a theoretical framework on this matter. At present, the literature available does not adequately take into consideration the range of perspectives and approaches to public and socially engaged art in different areas of the world. And the different use of the terms "public art" complicates the investigation.

The term "public art" is understood and utilized differently in various contexts. While for Europeans it encompasses mainly sculptures in public spaces, in the American view, it often includes community art projects. Suzanne Lacy has diffused this interpretation in her book, "Mapping the terrain: new genre public art."[1] As consequence

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[1] Suzanne Lacy, *Mapping the terrain: new genre public art* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995).

of this loosely defined milieu, artists who produce socially engaged art in the public domain find themselves in the middle of diverging expectations- those of the government and those of the audience.

This research attempts to create a starting point to explore how these art practices are employed to foster integration and to investigate the role of the government and of the artist in reaching out to the community. I will draw on an Italian case and then compare it to another case of art being used in an attempt to resolve social conflict by a European artist in South Africa. It would seem odd to compare the use of such contextual artistic practices in South Africa and Italy. However, a juxtaposition of the two cases reveals valuable insights, even if the degree of intensity varies among them. Here, I believe the focus on methodology is pertinent, particularly, the one adopted by the artist and the government to impact the audience.

Because of their social value, governments tend to promote art projects, especially in Southern European countries, where traditionally the structure of government tends to be more centralized. In search for inspiration and insight, many of these countries look to the well-established American experience of involving art to facilitate immigrant integration. However, the American model does have an important limitation: its interpretation of community art is very specific. From the outset, three glaring differences can be easily pointed out about the American when compared to others: it involves earlier patterns of immigration, it is characterized by a looser role of the government, and it pursues multiculturalism more than assimilation.[2]

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[2] However it's important to keep in mind that even among European countries there are significant differences in the degree of involvement of the community and of the government.

To discuss the nature of government involvement in the commissioning of public art and its effect on the perception of the art, I will consider two experiences. The first case, the Zingonia project, shows how direct involvement of the government in this socially engaged art resulted in a partial failure in terms of audience participation. The second case of René Klarenbeek provides an opportunity to evaluate a departure from the norm- i.e. a direct mediation of the artist.

The Progetto Zingonia is the only project in Italy that explicitly aims to integrate immigrants. Founded in 2000 in Zingonia, an area in the periphery of the industrial city of Bergamo in Northern Italy, it involved an artist, a public administrator, and a cultural mediator.[3] Professional artists were formally invited to design their works around issues of migration in a multicultural society. The attempt to encourage the participation of the immigrants did not succeed due to the strong involvement of the cultural mediator, an employee of the local administration whose responsibility was to act as a liaison between the community and the public administration. He was perceived to be working to heavily in favor of the government.

Looking for another example of socially engaged public art that could provide recommendations for the Italian case, I was directed to look at the work of René Klarenbeek, a Dutch artist who was working with the community of Mamelodians in South Africa.[4] Klarenbeek, "amongst and together with his audience,"[5] painted each day a different image and text on a billboard set up along a common road of the township, home to one million black people.

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[3] www.progettozingonia.it. November 1, 2005.

[4] Nicholas Lowe, Professor at the School of the Art Institute suggested me this source of ideas for comparison.

[5] According to René Klarenbeek's personal view and artistic objective, expressed on his website www.painter.nl. November 8, 2005.

As the Italian case shows, the danger of replicating an existent power structure is embedded in the public administration's methods in producing and promoting socially engaged public art. René's project shows a way to avoid this implication. His work is appealing to understand the dynamic with the audience in a contextual approach where artistic practice "cannot be seen in isolation from the social and cultural frame in which they operate."[6]

Together with the role of the government, the contextualization of the two projects involves also a discussion about audience and space. First, in both projects the notion of audience is central. Along with this, also a remark on who is the interlocutor "in a co-receptive speaking and listening position" for the audience is necessary. In discussing this, I shall consider as theoretical background the concept of "interlocutor" that Nicholas Lowe defines in his article, "Who is speaking, who is being heard?"[7] The notion of audience as participating in the production and authorship is relevant in this regard, especially from an educational point of view, to enhance the opportunities of integration.

While René succeeded in involving viewers as makers of his work, in the Zingonia project the process was less direct. The concept of audience in this type of socially engaged public art would deserve more in-depth analysis. The term "audience" automatically suggests a passive role of the recipients. To which degree are they involved

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[6] Malcolm Miles. First Symposium on "The contextual practices network", 1997. Cited by Helmut Hartwig- Conference: "Context art mediation"- Berlin, 2001. Following the contextual approach, artistic practices "cannot be seen in isolation from the social and cultural frame within which they operate." For a more detailed definition of contextual art practice see Jane Calow "Collaboration and dialogue: the contextual practice network." www.kunstimkontext.udk-berlin.de/ngbk. November 8, 2005

[7] Nicholas Lowe, *Who is Speaking Who is Being Heard?* In "Art Education Discourses," Volume 2. Leaf, Fruit and Seed. (Birmingham, UK: ARTicle Press UCE, 1999).

in the creation of the artwork? And even when the artist actively engages them, how much do they participate?

If it is difficult to answer questions about the audience, it's even more difficult to agree on who is the real interlocutor. Is it the artist, the public administrator, or the cultural mediator? By living among the community for the entire duration of the project, René is sharing ideas with the Mamelodians about the content of the work, his artistic creativity and his life. In the Italian case instead, the immigrant audience meets only with the cultural mediator instead of the artists.

It's important to consider the context of the two projects also in terms of space, both in real and figurative terms. The specific space where the action takes place is embedded in the idea that "space is political, inseparable from the conflictual and uneven social relations that structure specific societies at specific historical moments."[8] Looking at the geographic space, René chose to erect his billboard on a busy road in front of the hospital entrance and refers to the political and social situation of the township in his paintings. The Zingonia project is hosted in an abandoned factory rented by the local administration. The immigrants are entering another physical space owned by the Italian government.

The space where public art projects about immigration are situated is also a figurative one. René's art practice takes him to another level of creation: once he gets permission and funding to work in the streets of Mamelodi, in direct contact with the audience, the issue about what can be properly defined as a public place and about the physical space is no longer relevant. Following Homi Bhabha's notion of "third space,"

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[8] Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics*, Graham Foundation/Mit Press Series in Contemporary Architectural Discourse (Chicago, Ill. Cambridge, Mass.: Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts; MIT Press, 1996). p. xiv.

artwork is then situated on another level, one we could call a third level.[9] This concept is valuable to understand the way in which René used his art in the public domain. According to Bhabha, the "third space" is a mode of articulation, a way of describing a productive, and not merely reflective, space that engenders new possibilities. This hybrid third space provides also spatial politics of inclusion, rather than exclusion, which initiates new signs of identity and innovative sites of collaboration.

One painting in particular manifests this concept. In one of his billboards, René presents himself to the audience: "Hi, I am the white guy." His black assistant holds a sign saying "and I am his black assistant." On the billboard painted the following day, their roles are reversed: René is the white assistant and Kleinbooi the black guy. They both color their face with white and black paint to show that neither of them has really white or black skin and to underline that those terms are connected to rigid definitions of difference and skin color. In this work the artist operates in a sort of "in-between" space, as described by Homi Bhabha.[10] On this level, distinctions like black and white do not have a meaning anymore. The situation is different in the Zingonia project. While the content of the art situates the discourse on a "third space," the artists' efforts are thwarted by the project's connection with the government. This close relation confuses the public art project with the sovereign national culture.[11] This is well represented by the opening speech of the Mayor of Zingonia at the inauguration of the project.

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[9] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London; New York: Routledge, 1994). p. 4

[10] "In-between" is a liminal space, it is "the designations of identity, [it] becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower, black and white." Homi Bhabha, Op.Cit.1994. p. 4.

[11] This notion of national culture, proposed as an "imagined community" rooted in a "homogeneous empty time" of modernity and progress is discussed in Benedict R. O'G Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Rev. and extended ed. (London; New York: Verso, 1991).

This research wanted to raise awareness around public and socially engaged art projects. The work of the artist is very much more likely to be manipulated and misunderstood because of the intervention of the public administration in an area it considers its domain. This puts the artists who choose to locate their work in the discussion of these issues in danger of being instrumentalized for the government's own ends. Or the artist's work risks demotion to the category of "community art" with educational purposes, without taking into account that his or her engagement is part of an aesthetic.

Taking into consideration the work of René in South Africa and comparing it to the Italian case of Progetto Zingonia, I have been trying to find recommendations applicable to the Italian situation. I found that the low participation of the immigrants could be the result of a project's association with the government, in a more or less direct manner.

An active social articulation of difference in the process of public art seems to take place only if two conditions are satisfied. First, the artist must understand his or her potential as an interlocutor for the communities, as opposed to the government or cultural mediator in this way. The artist is in a better position to understand what immigrants need and want. The artist is able to privilege the human dimension of the immigrant over the political one. He or she uses art as a means to recognize and identify the immigrant's human agency. On the other hand, the public administrator and to certain extent, the cultural mediator's activities are inscribed in the Foucauldian *apparatus*. The

intentionality and uni-directionality of the central government provides local administrators and cultural mediators with the authority to intervene in the immigrants' communities. This is done according to the idea that they would know better what is best for the immigrants, what type of art and artists they would like to see and in which activities they would like to be involved.

Second, the project must be situated in the "Third Space," both geographically and metaphorically. Only in this way can public art projects reflect the continuous negotiation of cultural changes that characterizes the process of integration of the immigrants' communities. Only in this way will art reflect the hybridity in the condition in which immigrants live. A public art project related to immigration can function effectively only in what Homi Bhabha has called "Third Space," where the coexistence of different cultures replaces the dominance of the "mainstream," nationalist culture.[12] This position implies that the identity of immigrants and residents in a territory will keep changing, in a process of confrontation, dialogue, negotiation, and (re)invention. In this research, the focus has been primarily on the immigrants' audience and the resident population has been left in the background of the analysis. However, since it plays a central role in the integration process, further research should include the needs and reactions of the residents, in a dialectical relationship with the immigrants.

"The representation of difference must not be hastily read as a reflection of the pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition. The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical

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[12] "The intervention of the Third Space of enunciation, which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process, destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an integrated, open, expanding code." Homi Bhabha, Op. Cit. 1994. p. 37.

transformation."[13] A multicultural, integrated society must be based on a continuous

negotiation, which can be nurtured and represented through public and socially engaged

art. However, this process requires the time and patience of the artistic practice and

cannot be rushed by the rhythm of the politic.

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[13] Ibid. p. 2.