

Paul Ardenne, Public Art - Interminable

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Paul Ardenne, do you think our Western cities are visually "polluted" by the abundance of public art works?

Yes they are. Undeniably, public art to which city dwellers are subjected whether they like it nor not constitutes a "polluting" agent due to its exaggerated presence, its authoritative tone and its frequently arrogant visibility. In my opinion, the term "pollution" can be applied to such "museumized" cities as Venice, Florence, Bruges and Nuremberg, not to mention a major portion of Paris, Vienna, and Prague ... Moreover, and this represents a paradox, in these museum cities the "pollution" stems at least as much from the glut of public art works bequeathed by the past (such as statues, composite facades, and fountains) as from the obsessional fashion in which they are showcased. By being preserved at all costs, historically accredited public works are falsely revitalized. As such, they seem less like a legacy from the past and more like an element of contemporary urban syntax subjected to decorative and/or touristic norms. The visual pollution emanating from the painstakingly executed showcasing of public artworks reaches its apex in "over restored" urban artistic patrimonies the likes of Florida's Key West. This former colonial stronghold has been transformed into a better-than-new, cute little Disney World. Indeed, one of the Western world's main problems is its refusal to let cities die out, its hysterical compulsion to preserve.



Lori Hersberger, Burn Out, Motorcycle Choreography, 2000
© Transfert (Photo: Andy Pal)

What sort of relations does our Western society foster between remembrance and public art? What other type of attitude could it adopt?

With respect to artworks inherited from the past, the frenzied preservation efforts carried out by those responsible for culture in Western society have little to do with keeping remembrance alive. Quite to the contrary, Western society draws but a remote link between public art and remembrance, and more often than not the latter gets crushed by a taste for the pleasures of decoration, or even pleasure alone. Let's not delude ourselves. Tourists who visit Place Vendôme in Paris are highly unlikely to feel the affront and pride that the square's column originally inspired, will hardly reflect on its having been taken

down by the Communards (participants in the 1871 Commune of Paris, one of whom Courbet was held responsible for the column's destruction) nor on its subsequent re-erection by the Third Republic. How many still know how Place Concorde got its name that it was once named Place de la Révolution and featured a guillotine for mass executions, and only became "Concorde" thanks to

a decision of the Directory (1795)? Do visitors to the great Parisian cemetery Père Lachaise come to pay tribute to the dead or to enjoy the exoticism of the site?

Of course, certain authentic sites of remembrance do exist and are visited to that end. Some that come to mind are Dachau, Auschwitz, the enormous cemeteries in the valley of La Somme, the memorial to the victims of the Holocaust in Jerusalem, and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. Let us say that remembrance is subject to eclipses, and only applies to certain sites. Consider it a device arising out of certain circumstances of the day, something that can be reactivated at chosen moments or upon commemorative occasions. Thus, visits to Lenin's mausoleum in Moscow are made not so much for Lenin as for the excitement of confronting a modern mummy. Or simply in a gregarious spirit, because it belongs to the tour packages on offer with Intourist. Yes, at times, remembrance is also a commercial item.

In this connection, I would like to point out a second paradox bequeathed to us by modernism. At one time, the most avant-gardist artists were those who, a priori, refused to let themselves be burdened by remembrance, which to their mind served as a vehicle for necrosis and creative inhibitions. Yet it was these very artists who paid most attention to works of art from the past, considering them for what they actually were and not with an eye to their potential as instruments in the service of something else, for instance to cultural ends. Consider the Futurists and the Dadaists, how they advocated radically cleaning the slate and destroying the museums ... Which is the height of absurdity, when one realizes that those who today are concerned about works from the past tend to use them as artifacts that stand out above all because of their dazzle, honorability and mundane appeal.