

# DOES PUBLIC ART MATTER?

## A SOCRATIC EXPLORATION

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### 1. Public art: an exploration

Interventions on urban texture focused on art are often defined 'public art'. Their approach, strategy and shape is widely varied since it depends upon a unique dialogue between an artist and a specific site or area. The label itself cannot lead to a conventional model as it used to be at its beginning when public art was a list of equestrian statues in public squares, aimed at celebrating national or local heroes, or – before that – to remind subjects of the power of the sovereign. Among the several possible definitions a synthetic identification of the features of public art emphasizes its narrative action upon people, describing "the moment when the individual connects herself/himself to the collectively, and the new forms of living together, socialisation, but also homologation, solitude, isolation"<sup>1</sup>. In such an ambiguous and versatile definition we can find the role of the diffused bronze and marble works, public art whose publicness simply lies in its granted visibility to a wide urban community to convey the political value hierarchy of a place.

Since the beginning of history public art has been expression of the dominant power with specific functions:

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<sup>1</sup> Scardi, G. (2011: 18).

1. Decorative – this is a transverse function that characterized every public artwork;
2. Celebrative – usually of power (political or religious) either to reinforce an old power or to establish a new one;
3. Narrative/educational – public art was a tool to tell stories to people and to educate them through images;
4. Functional – public art has been also developed in spaces that had primarily another function (for example bridges, fountains, aqueducts and so on).

*Figure 1. Ara Pacis Augustea, 9 a.c – Function: celebrative (of the new power from Republic to Empire).*

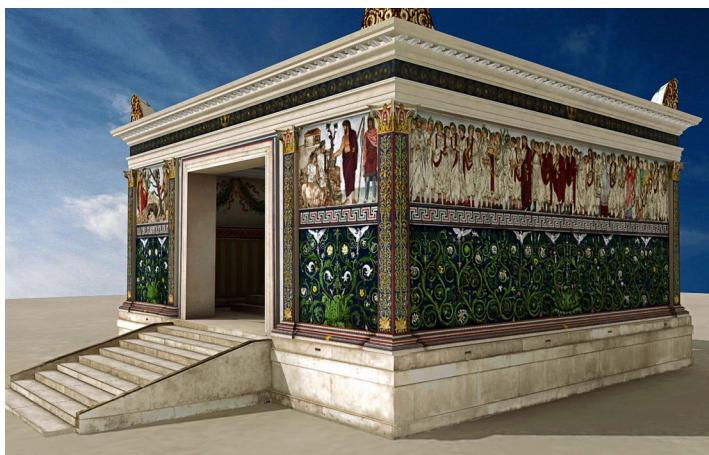


Figure 2. Medieval fresco – Oratory of the Disciplini of Clusone, in Val Seriana, Bergamo. Function: educational (intimidating and threatening).



Figure 3. Barcaccia fountain, Rome – Function: decorative and functional



After the many transformations of the Short Century everything changed and public art was given a different role: that of a shared critical representation of the collective self through non-conventional creative language, made of not necessarily noble materials and the focus upon its impact upon society as a new interpretation of the place and its dynamics with the more complex urban palimpsest.

*Figure 4. Statue of Giuseppe Mazzini in Piazza del Duomo, Prato. Function: celebrative (create new identity of Italy as a nation)*



Public art may play various roles. Looking at the past we should consider that in many periods artworks were not located in special places but almost evenly spread in the urban grid, until the manufacturing paradigm required a different and more functional shape for towns where the separation between centre and periphery was binary. Such a new shape induced public art to be crafted and located in symbolic places: its role as institutional decoration successfully pursued the goal of maintaining the political, social and possibly cultural status quo. In some cases, public art expands its scope and establishes a creative dialogue with other buildings and monuments in order for institutional messages to be clear and

shared, as happened in Italy during the early Fascism years<sup>2</sup>. This is the reason why statues are normally destroyed as soon as a revolution seems to work; it is a declared refusal of the past order, performing a ritually and materially irreversible destruction of its main symbol (the dictator's body, see Figure 5). It belongs to a wider process of *damnatio memoriae*.

*Figure 5. Lenin head found in Germany after the fall of the Berlin wall.*



The gradual emersion of a more complex economic and social paradigm is exerting a powerful impact upon the urban dynamics, overcoming the reciprocal indifference between wealthy and poor areas. When artists move to new districts spacial equilibria change. This may elicit reactions such as gentrification, but the speed and intensity of this process appear to be much faster than the establishment's pace. Public art cannot anymore assess the institutional role of urban poles, rather it needs to interpret the balance among urban areas, and aims at exerting an impact upon their social endowment, and visitors' search for local identity. It strengthens the community's sense of belonging, contributes to the increase of quality of urban life, facilitates social inclusion and encourages the (selective) attraction of new residents. This delicate and unique role requires a consistent dialogue between artworks and their site (i.e. the everyday life of their community): stronger art fails, and may emphasize conflictual atmospheres through a

<sup>2</sup> See, for a wide discussion on the changing roles of public art, Morea (2018).

clearer perception of urban diseases such as insufficient services, micro-crime, and distance from the places of shared sociality.

The question is not therefore related to the kind of artwork. This is a relevant issue for its semantic power, and its choice is out of the authors' disciplinary realm. Whatever artistic orientation, the challenge with present public art projects is the appropriate and consistent management of the urban area where public art is located. In such a way its presence acts as an attractor and above all as a clearly visible mirror for the urban community: it is not by chance that a powerful work of public art is the giant chrome bean by Anish Kapoor reflecting the everyday stroll in a wide square in Chicago, see Figure 6. This implies a delicate attention on the part of local administration, in order for public art to encourage the intensification of sociality, exchanges, new actions, trade localisation, and the varied activities whose combined occurrence can enhance local growth. No more public since visible, public art in the present is such for its ability to act as a powerful leverage for urban development in a systematic and possibly sustainable way. This requires a synergic strategy on the part of many various institutions, organisations, economic actors, creative artists, social groups and families.

*Figure 6. "Cloud Gate", giant chrome bean by Anish Kapoor, Chicago – Function: interaction with the community – The artwork is the mirror of the community.*



## 2. Research approaches

The research starts from a theoretical analysis elaborated on the four main urban change processes: regeneration, requalification, gentrification and self-made urbanism (Peck 2005; Evans and Shaw 2004; Smith 2002; Borri 1985; Glass 1964) and the pioneers who enabled these processes. However, the purpose of the research is to analyse which kind of public art model has been created in the urban change process, and in the specific case of “Triumphs and Laments” in Rome and “Superkilen” in Copenhagen.

The authors carried out ad hoc interviews (Kvale 1996) to the ‘pioneers’ on cultural processes and experiences in the studied areas. The aim was understanding the story behind a participant’s experiences (McNamara 1999), the impact of cultural heritage in regeneration projects, and what is the role of Public Administration to promote these changes. In particular, the interview contains 20 questions:

- questions 1 and 2 are general information of the interviewed;
- questions number 3, 4, 5 and 6 are general questions on the cultural project;
- questions number 7, 8, 9, and 10 are specific questions on the role of the project in the community and territory;
- questions 11, 12 and 13 are focused on the role of urban stakeholders;
- the last questions (from 14 to 20) are based on the role of Public Administration in the project and territory and the future of the project and urban areas in following years.

This stage took one year; the same open-ended questions were asked to all the interviewees; this approach facilitates faster interviews that can be more easily analysed and compared.

The case studies (section 3) was carried out in the Trastevere and Nørrebro neighbourhoods respectively in Rome and in Copenhagen, based on an ethnographic approach for understanding how organiza-

tions has undergone changes (Peltonen, 2010). This research process has been held in a participatory context: most of the participants were interested and motivated in the analysis of the urban changing processes that they had contributed to raise and therefore very inclined to give their contribution. The main outcomes of the analysis show a substantial connection between the kind of action carried out and the possible degree of social engagement, along with the shared perception of common profiles in cultural resources. The need to activate cultural investments within a strategic framework, and the symmetrical weakness of occasional action was emphasized. The case studies are enriched by a qualitative research methodology as documental analysis for reviewing and evaluating digital documents (Bowen 2009) and interviews to stakeholders that follow the structure above explained. During the research the information have been systematized, summarized and elaborated in order to present a map of the use and interpretation of unprecedented territorial initiatives and their critical reading on the basis of the main theories and models considered.

### **3. Case studies**

#### **3.1 Triumphs and Laments in Rome: how a wall became a landscape**

Between April and June 2016 an Italian water site was the venue – and the object – of a unique art experience: in Roma, along the Tiber River and between the “Sisto” and “Mazzini” bridges, Willliam Kentridge disclosed a 90-metres long frieze devoted to Roman history and chronicle. Its name, “Triumphs and Laments”, simply depicts the waves of success and crisis whereby Rome has been continuously driven through the centuries, starting with the she-wolf feeding the Founder Romulus and ending with Pier Paolo Pasolini being brutally killed in the suburbs. The strategic framework of such an unconventional mural (crafted just through the elimination of the dirt from the walls with

a cold-water beam) represents a reconciliation between the river and the town, after more than 150 years of reciprocal indifference due to the high walls built by the unitary government after 1870, visually and symbolically separating the Tiber and Rome.

*Figure 7. “Triumphs and Laments” frieze by William Kentridge.*



“Triumphs and Laments” is a large-scale, 500 meter-long frieze, erased from the biological patina on the travertine embankment walls that line Rome’s urban waterfront. Exploring dominant tensions in the history of the Eternal City from past to present, a procession of figures, up to 10 meters high, represents Rome’s greatest victories and defeats from mythological to present time, forming a silhouetted procession on Piazza Tevere, how the embankment between Ponte Sisto and Ponte Mazzini is informally defined.

The work was inaugurated on April 21, 2016 with the premiere of a theatrical event created in collaboration with the composer Philip Miller, featuring a live shadow play and two processional bands performing against the backdrop of the frieze. The function of this public art project is narrative and gives the opportunity to regain a part of the city’s identity and to influence the transformation of public space, beginning with the adoption of Piazza Tevere. In fact, a diverse team of both Italian and international volunteers, universities, academies, local and foreign institutions has shown enormous interest and gen-

erosity in donating and volunteering for a project that speaks of Rome and its history. More than 200 volunteers were involved in the project.

Figure 8. *Area of intervention.*

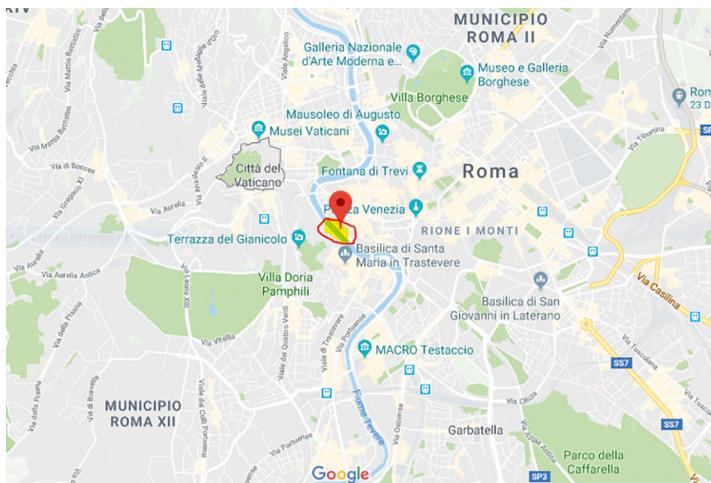


Figure 9. "Triumphs and Laments", opening event.



The innovation of this project lies in its transience. The frieze is going to disappear in a few years, according to its conception on the part of Kentridge: the artwork is transitory like our presence. The function of

“Triumphs and Laments” is not only decorative and narrative but it attracts the attention to the state of degradation of the Tiber.

*Figure 10. Detail of the intervention.*



### 3.2 The Superkilen, Copenhagen. A park becomes a space for cultural integration

“Superkilen”<sup>3</sup> is an urban public space wedging through one of the most ethnically diverse and socially challenged neighborhoods in Denmark, Nørrebro<sup>4</sup>. “Superkilen” is a public project promoted by Copenhagen Municipality in partnership with Realdania<sup>5</sup>. The mission through “Superkilen” is to improve multicultural integration and a better urban life style, and to reduce acts of violence and micro-criminality thanks to the co-design of green, sports and social areas in an abandoned area situated not in the city centre although close to it.

<sup>3</sup> The meaning of “Superkilen” in Danish is “super wedge”.

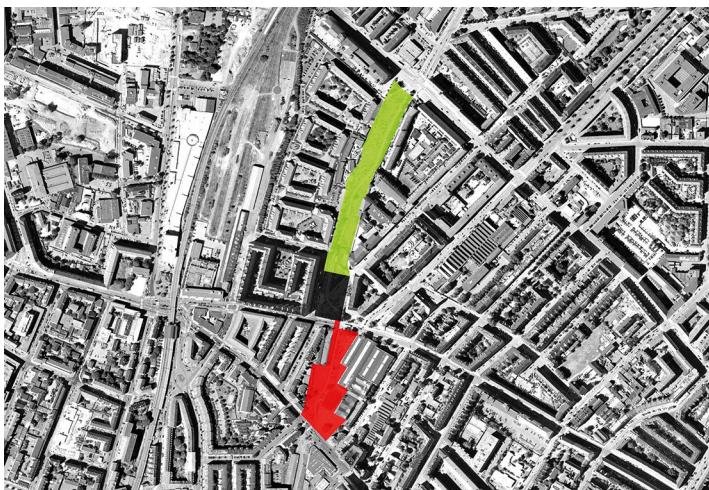
<sup>4</sup> Nørrebro is one of the 10 official districts of Copenhagen, Denmark. It is northwest of the city centre.

<sup>5</sup> Realdania is a private association active in Denmark, supporting philanthropic projects in the areas of architecture and planning.

*Figure 11. Copenhagen' Districts map.*

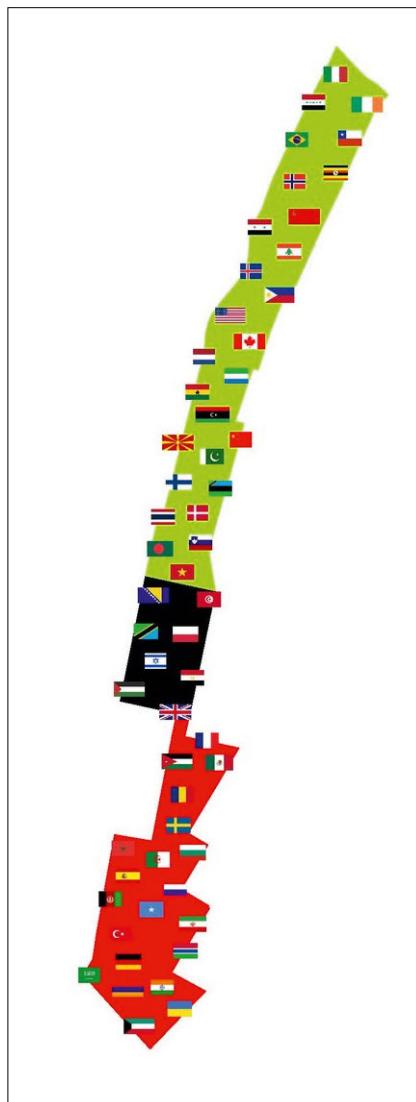
The project was designed thanks to the collaboration between the arts group Superflex, Bjarke Ingels Group (BIG is a Danish architecture and design firm) and Topotek1, a German landscape architecture firm; the park was officially opened in June 2012 after three years of work. The three designers have reacted with the idea of moving here stories and cities from around the world. Through newspapers, radio, internet, electronic mail or install-on-site, they asked residents to suggest urban furnishings for the future Superkilen: each of the 57 ethnic Nørrebro communities could be represented in a park by at least one object. Bjarke Ingels (Founding Partner, BIG, 2012) observed that “rather than a public outreach process towards the lowest common denominator or a politically correct post-rationalization of preconceived ideas navigated around any potential public resistance, we proposed public participation as the driving force of the design leading towards the maximum freedom of expression. By transforming public procedure into proactive proposition we curated a park for the people by the people (peer-to-peer design) literally implemented”.

Figure 12. Superkilen



Superkilen has one overarching idea that has been conceived as a giant exhibition of urban best practices, a sort of collection of globally found objects coming from the different nationalities of the neighborhood residents. A small stainless plate inlaid in the ground describing it accompanies each object: what it is and where it comes from (in Danish and in the language of its origin). In fact, the “Superkilen” project was co-designed with the residents, asked them what they wanted in a public park from their Countries; The Superflex group observed: “Our mission was to craft the big picture in the extreme detail of a personal memory or story, which on the surface might appear insignificant, but once hunted down and enlarged became super big. A glass of Palestinian soil in a living room in Nørrebro serving as a memory of a lost land, enlarged to a small mountain of Palestinian soil in the park. A distant Mediterranean flirt in the 1970s symbolised by a great iron bull, hunted down and raised on a hill in the park” (Superflex, 2012). The conceptual starting point is a division of “Superkilen” into three zones and colours: green, black and red in 750 metres. The different surfaces and colours

were integrated to form new, dynamic surroundings for the everyday objects.



The American Institute of Architects awarded the project with a 2013 AIA Honor Award in the Regional & Urban Design category. It was shortlisted for the Design of the Year award by the Design Museum in London as well as for the European Union Prize for Contemporary Architecture.

#### **4. Concluding remarks**

The two case studies presented in this chapter can be useful to carry out a reflection of the initial research questions raised on the role of public art in present time:

*Do they represent the community that live there?*

Both case studies represent the intention to establish a dialogue with the community living in a wide urban area, but there are two substantial differences between Rome and Copenhagen:

- The intervention in Copenhagen is a coral expression of public art, since many artists from all over the world express creativity. The intervention in Rome is the artwork of a single artist, William Kendrige, who was asked to interpret the relationship between the city, its history and its community.
- The community of reference of the two projects is different. While the “Superkilen” is a multicultural site-specific community of a Copenhagen neighbourhood, the project of Rome addresses a wider community where residents and visitors belong with no tight territorial connection. Indeed, the Tiber river is a sort of urban backbone and the frieze aims at establishing, and possibly consolidating, a dialogue with the complex history of Rome itself on the part of any specific social and territorial groups.

*Have we overcome the concept of public art as expression of certain power?*

For sure each case study above examined starts from a different perspective about the role of public art, with the idea that it is expression of different communities, through stakeholders involved in the project, and do not express the vision of a single power.

*Is public art a new tool for transforming a neighbourhood into the place for a new community?*

The attempt of both projects is to intervene in the neighbourhood where they are located and contribute to enhance a sense of community and of belonging through art.

*Does the regeneration process starts from a spontaneous artists' intervention that might be transformed afterwards into gentrification?*

This specific question is related to the Copenhagen project since in the case of Rome we cannot talk about gentrification of that area of the city. Indeed the area of the Tiber involved in Kentridge's work is located between the historic centre and Trastevere, both areas variably developed (Trastevere already gentrified by other phenomena) but not harmoniously connected with Piazza Tevere. What the intervention in Rome seeks is a new and more intensive attention to the Tiber area that proves quite isolated from the urban flows. Until now the Kendrige work has not changed that situation of neglect, since the attention to that area was temporary and did not achieve continuance. The "Superkilen" experience is too recent to evaluate whether the project may lead to gentrifying the area around it.

*Is public art functional and planned by public administrations or private developers who want to invest into certain neighbourhoods?*

This interpretation of public art as a tool for Public Administrations and private investors to intervene and change a specific urban area might be true in different contexts but not in the ones analyzed. The behaviour of the PA is quite different in the two case studies:

- “Superkilen” is part of a PA strategy. The Public Administration has to support medium-long term projects and strategies that show an integrated perspective. Indeed, the Public Administration, within a long-term strategy in terms of policies and funds, coordinated Copenhagen’s experiences. “Superkilen” is part of a series of projects that have made Copenhagen one of the best practices at the forefront of sustainable cities, elected among the best cities in the world to live and work.
- “Triumphs and Laments” was not funded by the public administration, although the removal of the dirt from the Tiber wall was an in-kind intervention on the part of the waste removal municipal agency. The “Tevereterno” association and other participants promoted the whole process.

For sure, one of the reason why “Triumphs and Laments” achieved a very limited continuity and was not linked to other initiatives is the lack of active support from the PA. The municipal administration of Rome is not pursuing any medium-long term strategies concerning the role and the urban links the Tiber should have in the future of the city. Our case studies clearly demonstrate that the success of an intervention should be based on the regular participation of residents, and on co-design of goods and services aimed at making the area familiar and crowded. The cultural production has to be integrated into the eco-system where it is installed, and its design into its community.

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