

Public Galleries — the Politicised Nature of Public-ness in Contemporary Art Practice and Aesthetic Theory

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ABSTRACT. The term public can be understood and contested in a variety of ways; ownership, access, scale, authenticity etc. This paper focuses on the use of public-ness in contemporary art practice and theory, revealing the concept to serve as a proxy for contesting what counts as art. Given the artworld context of contemporary art, the premier requirement for an object or practice to be art is to have 'a public'. Distinguishing between 'a public' and 'public', I argue that the artworld constitutes a limited account of public-ness as it often reduces the notion of public to a particular group. Here I focus on curatorial practices that invoke competing notions of public-ness. By considering subversive aesthetic practices I argue that a more progressive account of public-ness is possible in aesthetics. This is an account of public-ness grounded in openness, iterability and interactivity rather than 'a public'. Crucially, this is the case when the public space is a politicised gallery where you can react to hierarchies of interpretation instituted by the powers that curate.

AN CEANN COMHAIRLE: Before we enter upon the business to-day, I would like to remind Deputies of the position of visitors in the Public Gallery. Visitors are admitted to the Public Gallery, not as a matter of right, but as a privilege. While in the Public Gallery they should not applaud or demonstrate in any way. Yesterday we had from the Public Gallery demonstrations for various and contrary opinions expressed in the Dáil. Deputies are, of course, aware that there should be no such demonstrations. I am sure Deputies on all sides of the House have done their best to persuade their friends as to what the proper course of action is. Should there be a continuance of demonstrations from the Public Gallery, interfering with the debates

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in the Dáil, we feel we have no option but to close the Gallery for at least a period. I hope that will suffice in connection with this matter.

Hayes (1927: p. 3)¹

I. Introduction

What does the term ‘public’ mean? It suggests a wide variety of connotations, often so disparate that the term ‘public’ is to be approached with extreme caution. Some key ways in which we can approach the term include; ownership, access, scale, authenticity etc.

If we approach ‘public’ in terms of ownership we can ask if something is public if it serves the public or if the public are liable for its maintenance? For example; national parks, a national art collection, public debt etc. If instead we focus on accessibility it is equally unclear if something is public if it is performed in the view of all, well-known, used significantly or has some equality of access. In the case of the aforementioned parliamentary public gallery it is clear from the *Ceann Comhairle’s* comments that the gallery is public only insofar *Dáil* proceedings (the *res publica*, public affairs) are usually performed or made openly in the view of the gallery.

Similarly from the perspective of scale, does ‘public’ relate to the people as a whole or a certain community of people (for example the majority, taxpayers, a group of spectators, a crowd, “the public at large” etc.)? In terms of one’s authentic self we can ask; is your public or private self your most authentic self?

It is clear that under each of these approaches the term is routinely contested. Where a claim of public is made, a counter claim of private is not far behind. Just as the same individual may be described as a freedom fighter or a terrorist, the term ‘public’ often operates as a weasel word empty of real meaning like an egg-shell devoid of its contents. It is for this very reason that I will not venture a final definition of the term ‘pub-

¹ Dáil Éireann Debate, *Vol. 21 No. 2*, Visitors in Public Gallery. Wednesday, 12 October 1927, <http://debates.oireachtas.ie/dail/1927/10/12/00003.asp>. The Dáil is the name of the Irish lower house of parliament, literally translated as The Assembly of Ireland. *An Ceann Comhairle* is the name of The Speaker of the House, literally translated as Head of the Council.

lic'. Instead I will focus on some of the key ways in which the shell is filled and contested. Crucially however, each contestation reveals a politics. What counts as public is thus simply a reflection of the perspective of some prevailing institution, authority or theory (be it a theory of politics, economics or self etc.). No doubt it is because the term 'public' is currently so pervasive that we see such a variety of ways in which it is understood and applied.

Just as each different use expands the notion of public, each contestation reveals a nuance in our understanding of public-ness.

2. The Artworld

As artists and aesthetic theorists how are we to approach the confusion surrounding the term 'public'? By engaging the variety of paradoxical (and dialectical) approaches to public-ness, practitioners and theorists can clarify the role that the term public plays in contemporary discourse. In other words, this can be done by focusing on sites and objects where the public-ness at play is contested.

In this regard the artworld itself is revealing. For example, what counts as, or makes an exhibition 'public'? Likewise what would a 'public' artefact be? A neo-traditionalist model to public space and objects is provided by the architect Leon Krier in his diagram *Components of a True City* [FIGURE 1]². Here "Res Publica" is distinguished from "Res Economica" in a formula that crudely separates civic life into two separate, if interconnected, realms. Furthermore, in terms of the artworld Krier's formula serves to cloister the realm of public exhibitions and artefacts. In the examples of contemporary art practice that I will focus on the answers to these questions are less clear. The realm of the public cannot be easily separated from economics. A cloistered account of exhibitions and artefacts is a limited one.

In contemporary practice and theory where the title art is but a name conferred by an institution, some notion of 'public' has become a given. It is one of the key measurable factors for the performance of art institu-

² In Carmona, Matthew Ed. *Public Places - Urban Spaces*. London: Taylor & Francis, 2003, p 86.

tions. All major art galleries, for example, routinely monitor attendance figures (footfall) and other varieties of impact such as online traffic. This public-ness of art, understood in terms of outreach and accessibility, is not necessarily stated explicitly but it is consistently present.

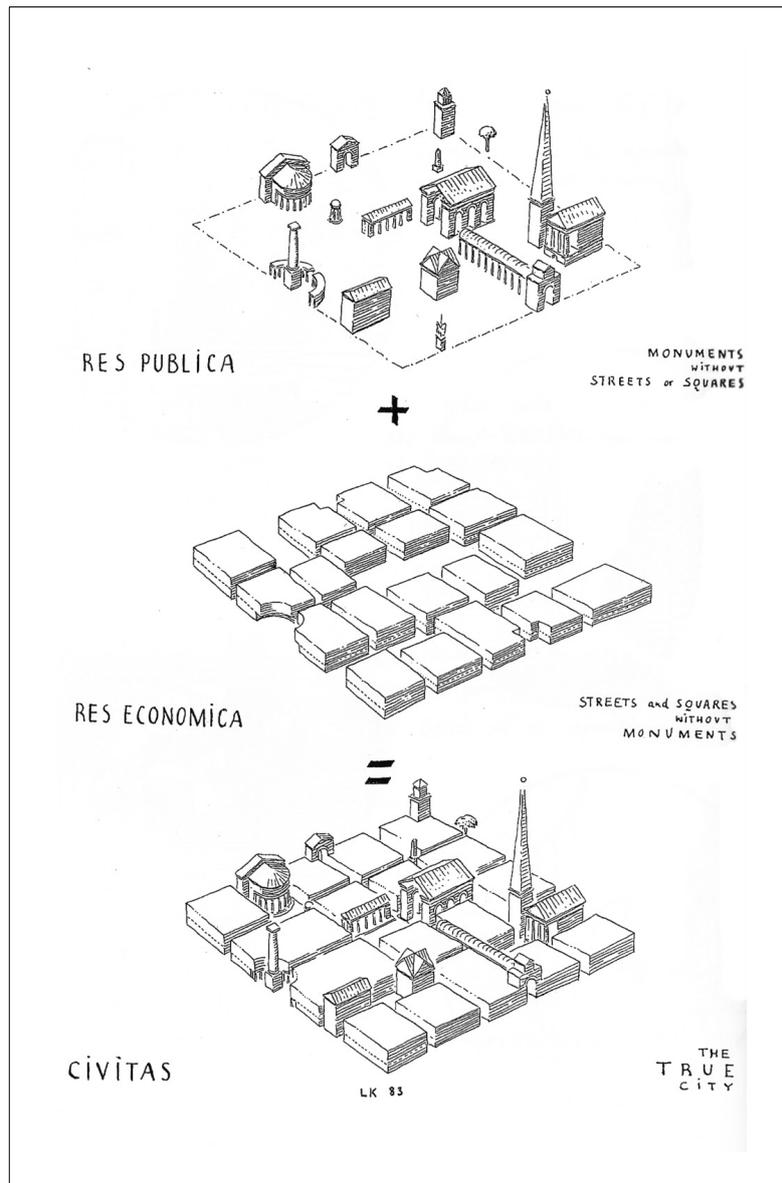


FIGURE 1. Leon Krier, *Components of a True City*, 1984.

Arthur Danto characterises the artworld in this way: “to see something as art requires something the eye cannot descry – an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld” (Danto, 1964: p. 580). In this atmosphere Danto maintains, “museums, connoisseurs and others are [the] makeweights in the Artworld” (Danto, 1964: p. 584). Thus we have, beyond the broad notion of the public in general, ‘a (professional and qualified) public’ as an essential feature in the operation of the artworld. Furthermore it is clear that this particular public has an important relationship to the notion of public-ness. De Duve, for example, explains; “Whatever other things art critics do, whatever criteria come into play when they write, collect, organize shows, buy and sell art, when all is said and done, art critics are *public* and professional art lovers” (De Duve, 1996: p 37 *my emphasis*).

This implicit role of the public nature of aesthetic experience can be traced back at least to Kant’s aesthetics where the connection between art and the practice of art criticism is cemented. Kant, however, did not consider aesthetic judgement in the context of the artworld. Nonetheless, his emphasis on the role of the critic means that when art is understood simply in terms of art institutional practice the public aspect of the conferral of the title art is the zenith of aesthetic experience and creativity. In this scenario the premier requirement for an object or practice to be art is to have ‘a public’. In practice this means ‘have institutional status’.

However there is a subtle, yet vital, difference between ‘a public’ and ‘public’. ‘A public’ suggests the existence of multiple publics and the exclusion of certain groups or individuals. Suffice to say ‘professional art critics’ understood as ‘a public’ would constitute a deficient account of public-ness. ‘A public’, in short, could easily be private.

In addition to ‘artworld professionals’, ‘the museum going public’ can by default be taken as standing for the public but this is also a problematic equation insofar as it elevates a particular (if rather loose) community to the status of ‘the public’. In each case we are left with the concern of a particular community’s approach defining the term public. Baudrillard, for example, described the museum going public in this way: “People come to see a good bit of spectacle” (Baudrillard, 2005: p. 135). The “spectacle” searching public need not be the definition of public-ness.

There is in this critique of art as spectacle, the very real and repeated

fear that art is only connected to the public (understood as the majority of the population) in a curious and inauthentic way. Art now, in its institutional form, is seen by many artworld theorists as existing only as publicity for 'a consuming public', where consumption is understood within an economic paradigm.

This distinction between 'a public' and 'public' is a result of the need to locate and identify what (or who) counts as public. This distinction gets to the heart of the politics of approaching public-ness. One way to capture this politics is by focusing on the competition between the two different publics ('artworld professionals' and 'the museum going public') mentioned above.

Dewey established and later Grunig expanded the Situational theory of publics, arguing that publics can only be defined insofar as they are situated in terms of some degree of involvement, problem solving, recognition etc. For example, artworld professionals, the museum going public etc.

The challenge for aesthetics in considering public-ness is to ask if the term public is to be eternally situated or is a non-situated account of public possible? Can public-ness, in short, be about more than stakeholders?

From the situational/institutional approach we can see that the artworld certainly constitutes and requires 'a public' (a collection of self-identifying or at least identifiable individuals) but this is only a limited account of public-ness. 'A particular public' need not be the clear addressee of art; rather art can be thrown out into the void. That is not to deny the role of an audience but to resist a target audience for fear of becoming overly didactic.

Thus when we consider the artworld community we can see that it is limited to it being counted as public only on situated terms. For example, under each of the criteria of ownership, access, scale, authenticity etc. the equation of museum going public with the term public is a problematic one.

Furthermore, through the institutional ability to occupy simultaneously that which is counted and the negotiation of that which becomes counted (in the form of the curation of so-called alternative exhibitions and artefacts) the artworld is able to engage in what Rancière would call

the “depoliticization of the public sphere”³. The logic of this practice is the exclusion of disagreement and contestation. Anything can now, in effect, be granted artworld validation and status. The effect of this forgoing of public contestation is the submitting of the aesthetic realm to ‘a public’, an artworld public.

The avant-garde, as Rochlitz would say, is subsidised by the established order. In this contemporary institutional reality, so-called ‘alternative art’ is sponsored by the inherent structure and violent spectacle partaken in by the institutions of the city and fails to challenge existing accounts of public-ness.

This sponge-like quality of artworld status to absorb new artefacts and practices as art is paralleled by the development modern cities. No longer are each clear units limited by their boundary walls. Instead both are now ambiguous entities whose limits are constantly open to reconsideration.

Thus we can see that a primary contestable space in which to consider public-ness is the artworld itself and that the urban landscape is an apt and appealing site for such considerations.

3. Contesting the Artworld Notion of Public — Public Galleries

The subversion of institutional and artworld regulation is the subversion of the political and aesthetic system. Modes of “political subjectivization” occur when people begin to speak on their own behalf, and in speaking on their own behalf, assume the right to occupy public space, a public space whose co-ordinates immediately shift to take account of these new voices. The subjectivity that speaks for itself, is no longer outside, is the subversive realization of public-ness⁴.

An uncountable scenario, I suggest, arises (in the artworld) when we no longer are certain what counts as an exhibition or art object. This scenario arises when one is presented with the question is this a site aligned to the artworld? This question can also be conceived in the following way: Is

³ The incorporation of anti-aesthetic discourse in his conception of the “aesthetic regime of art” is Rancière’s way to explain the de-politicization of the public sphere.

⁴ In keeping with my reluctance to offer a final definition of the term ‘public’ it is worth noting here that in this passage I am referring instead to the realization of public-ness.

there 'a public' to which this work is associated? So called 'street art' often plays on these questions.

Contemporary art practice shows an ever-increased emphasis on site-specificity, trans-nationality, trans-disciplinarily, intersectionality, temporality etc. Exhibitions are increasingly *ad hoc* projects that are valued for their ability move across boundaries.

Crucially it is the flexibility in the notion of what counts as a contemporary art exhibition and art object that allows the re-evaluation of the public sphere. In so doing we are afforded a chance to explore public-ness. It is this which allows us to imagine something that might perhaps be called 'public galleries' as opposed to galleries for specific publics.

Moreover, what often makes these sites alternative is that they offer a different politics of exhibition. Often this is a politics whereby the curator effects in blurring the distinction between public and private space. In short, such exhibitions are places where the practices of the non-curated gallery (we might say public) are bridged to the artworld.

We need to be wary however; as such re-evaluation can only be temporary. Redefined exhibitions and artefacts compliment the artworld where the scope for building credit in terms of reputation remains. These sites or objects cannot be considered as essentially alternative to the art market and the ability of the artworld professionals to cultivate and groom 'a public'.

We can now see how alternative approaches to exhibitions are political insofar as they alter our understanding of the term public. Recognising that social and urban space is a discourse to be decoded, the aesthetic becomes a place to negotiate a new political situation/regime. For example, architecture is more than the mere built environment; it is the actualisation of ideologies. Accordingly, political change has traditionally sought the re-depiction of public space. Decisions concerning the social space, national geography, ordering of landscape, identity of the figures in the landscape etc. are decisions to re-inscribe the public space.

All one needs to do here is consider examples of contested public space. In the case of *An Ceann Comhairle's* directions we see the parliamentary chamber as a governed and contestable space. Other sites of public space for consideration could include the courtroom, an online forum such as Youtube or the urban landscape itself.

It is the last of these that I will focus on. Aesthetic intervention, via the actual repainting of the urban landscape offers us an opportunity to consider the contesting public space. This is not the re-imagining of the public space from within the gallery but rather, it is the re-imagining of the public space as gallery. More importantly it is an engagement with the notion of public-ness insofar as it amounts to the challenging of the contemporary practices of policing, surveillance and governance. Given that the royal road to artworld legitimation exists such contestations are likely to become equally governed spaces in time.

So called ‘public galleries’ already exist and they have their own rules, their own terms on which the idea of public is understood. The ‘public gallery’ in a chamber of parliament is a space where individuals can view the parliamentary proceedings and attend debates. In the UK the term Strangers’ Gallery⁵ is used, revealing a particularly undesirable approach to the understanding of public-ness.

Let the restrictions of these public galleries as witnessed in *An Ceann Comhairle’s* statement be a cautionary tale for our engagement with the notion of public-ness. Let them show that by adding the term public the space does not become less regulated. In fact it by adding the term public a certain regulation is implied.

Let them show that traditionally the space for the public is an addendum, not the natural order of business, a space that one is “admitted to” temporarily and “not as a matter of right, but as a privilege” and as a friend. It is a space that usually permits no contestation, no demonstration and no opinion.

Good examples of this are Privately Owned Public Spaces (POPS) or Privately Owned Public Open Spaces (POPOS). These are ‘public’ spaces that are open to the public, but owned by a private entity, typically a commercial property developer. One such space is the Zuccotti Park POPS which hosted the Occupy Wall Street movement during their 2011 pro-

⁵ In the UK in November 2004, a parliamentary motion implemented the recommendation of the Modernisation Committee that the term *stranger* no longer be used and be replaced with either *member of the public* or *the public*. The term ‘Strangers’ Gallery’ is still used however. See <http://www.parliament.uk/site-information/glossary/strangers/>.

tests⁶. In these so called ‘public spaces’ there are nonetheless limits to what the public may do. Zuccotti Park POPS is owned by Brookfield Office Properties and their position regarding the protests was as follows: “Zuccotti Park [POPS] is intended for the use and enjoyment of the general public for passive recreation”. “Passive recreation” is undoubtedly a deficient account of public-ness.

If as artists and theorists we are to consider an alternative to these so called ‘public galleries’ it is clear that uncountable scenarios, an ethic of openness and the possibility to challenge rules are essential to non-situated public galleries.

4. Examples: Who will Curate the Curators?

It is worth considering the politicised nature of public-ness in contemporary art practice with reference to concrete examples.

I have argued before that the advent of “street art” signals the inclusion of graffiti in the definition of art. Furthermore I believe that this development marks a changing nature of ‘public’ space and exhibitions. Here the street can now be reasonably regarded as a legitimate location for the contesting of what counts as art and more importantly what counts as public.

In contemporary urban art this politics of contesting what counts as public is usually conceived as a battle between two different publics. This difference is manifested in the distinction between legitimate “street art” and illegitimate “graffiti”. In June 2007, the National Gallery at Trafalgar Square in London had life-size waterproof vinyl reproductions of some of its most famous paintings (including the works of John Constable and Leonardo Da Vinci) displayed on the streets of central London. The exhibition was called “The Grand Tour”⁸ and ran for twelve weeks in the West End.) It sought to engage the ‘public’ with art within galleries by simply

⁶ A key reason for why the Occupy movement were attracted to Zuccotti Park was the fact that it was not subject to the usual public park curfew.

⁷ See Fractenberg, Ben “Zuccotti Park Can’t Be Closed to Wall Street Protesters, NYPD Says” in *DNAinfo New York*, September 28th 2011, <http://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/20110928/downtown/zuccotti-park-cant-be-closed-wall-street-protesters-nypd-says>. Last accessed June 10th 2013.

⁸See www.thegrandtour.org.uk.

using the reproductions as advertising for the originals and as such failed to engage with the public-ness of its urban location. The overwhelming curatorial direction was to experience these works in their gallery setting.

By 2013 tokens of interactive engagement have been incorporated such exhibitions. In an echo of “The Grand Tour” a collaborative project between Richard Reed (co-founder of Innocent Drinks), the Art Fund, Tate, Posterscope, Vizeum and 101 Creative Agency, with Easyart, Blippar, Arts-MediaPeople, Clearchannel, CBS Outdoor, JC Decaux, Ocean and Prime-sight and the Guardian called “Art Everywhere” was exhibited on the streets of Britain. As with “The Grand Tour”, “Art Everywhere” sought to turn the streets of the United Kingdom into an art gallery, yet on a national scale. This project began with a call for the public to vote for paintings from a long-list of 100 paintings in public collections and to fund installation with “rewards” ranging from badges to t-shirts and billboard posters depending on how much is donated.

Then, for two weeks in August 2013, posters of 57 short-listed artworks were exhibited in 22,000 locations across the United Kingdom. Again this project employed the missionary discourse of bringing real art to the streets. And while such a goal may be a noble intention it overlooks the public-ness at play in the urban landscape. While this project is certainly public in terms of scale and perhaps even ownership, in terms of access and authenticity it too, like “The Grand Tour” and the directions for the use of Zuccotti Park POPS encourage “passive recreation”. Furthermore, by placing posters of artworks in places usually reserved for advertising “Art Everywhere” serves to equate these 57 works with advertising.

In a similar vein, the distinction between the legitimate public art and illegitimate public art was central to the latest initiative of Dublin City Council to tackle so-called “vandalism”. In September 2012, Dublin City Council (DCC) took the approach of employing DDFH+B advertising agency (specifically Mark and Paddy) to sarcastically curate the “tags” across the city⁹.

That this initiative seeks to frame graffiti as pernicious for a particular public is clear. These works are sarcastically curated because they are a cost to public finances. Each commentary was accompanied with the

⁹ See <http://dublingraffitied.com/>.

following information: “Every year over €350,000 of taxpayers’ money is spent removing meritless graffiti from our city streets. Money that the Dublin City Council could use for so much more. It’s a crime to see it wasted.” Ironically much of the original graffiti was concerned with abuses of tax revenue and tax dodging.

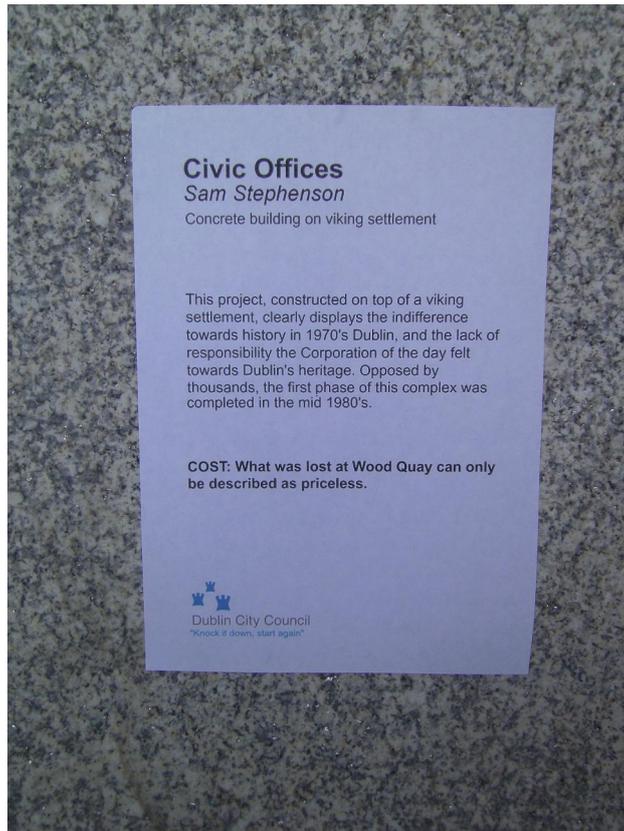


FIGURE 1. DDFH+B, *Dublin City Council*, 2012.

This curatorial response [FIGURE 2] to DCC's anti-graffiti curation is, I believe, particularly important¹⁰. It demonstrates not only the changing nature of public space and art exhibitions into something more interactive,

¹⁰ The construction of the Civic Offices at Wood Quay was a controversial development lasting over twenty years, marked by protests, court cases and extensive publicity. The design for the headquarters of Dublin Corporation was only partially constructed as

but the politicised nature of public-ness in contemporary art practice. In this example it is clear that these curatorial practices are invoking competing notions of public-ness.

Insofar as this curation of curation is on behalf of an imagined public it is tentatively situated in the public that initially protested the construction in question. Yet the ambiguity and anonymity of this curation of curation enables this work to occupy a tentative position of non-situatedness. The comment, I venture, is not on behalf of 'a public' but rather the public. The public to which this work is associated is unclear and as such it presents an uncountable scenario. Is it for the museum going public or the artworld professionals or some other public?

Equally it is unclear if it should count as curation, art or something else. One thing that is clear however is that such objects cannot be considered as eternally alternative to the art market. In time such objects can quite conceivably be the latest fetish object of the art market and the property of a certain public.

As an insight into public-ness this example shows that public space is a politicised gallery where you can react to hierarchies of interpretation instituted by the powers that curate.

5. Conclusion

The non-situated possibilities of the term 'public' render it politically more progressive than the notion of community or 'a public'. In the term public there is no inherent hostility to others. As such public is a liquid notion and in its makeup there is a blend that maintains the potential to carry alternate meanings but to do so only temporarily. Its consistent dilution via practice and theory is the mark of how steadfast the notion of public is. The term itself is so resolutely open to the degree that it is clouded by the endless contestations, situations and re-situations of what is public.

De Duve points toward a non-situated account of public when he writes: "The public has no collective strategy and its cohesion is only a *de-multiplied body* whose unity is likewise nothing but a souvenir" (De Duve,

the remains of the Viking city and a section of the medieval city walls were found preserved beneath. This find is considered to be one of the premier Viking sites in Europe. The architect was Sam Stephenson.

1996: p. 406). I venture that among this ambiguous and unclear traffic jam of meanings, a central notion of an attempt at ‘openness’ connects each of these approaches to the term public. The challenge of the term is to maintain that non-situated openness, even if it most likely to become a fetish object, a souvenir.

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