

St. vs. Sq.

by Lize Mogel

Public space is an old habit. The words public space are deceptive; when I hear the words, when I say the words, I'm forced to have an image of a physical place I can point to and be in. I should be thinking only of a condition; but instead, I imagine an architectural type, and I think of a piazza, or a town square, or a city commons. Public space, I assume, without thinking about it, is a place where the public gathers. The public gathers in two kinds of spaces. The first is a space that is public; the second is a space that is made public, a place where the public gathers precisely because it doesn't have the right—a place made public by force.

-Vito Acconci, from "Public Space in a Private Time", in *Critical Inquiry* 16, University of Chicago, 1990

Public space is habitual—it is expected. As shared space, it lies within the American ideal of a functional urban environment. This concept seems traditionalist, but with the incessant push toward privatization, it can be quite radical. The term "public space" is slippery, and can't be used without setting parameters. Acconci's text is a point of departure to discuss possible definitions within the city of Los Angeles.

A few words about places like parks or plazas--these spaces are *civic spaces*-- places which are created by the community for the community (or by the city for the city). These park and plaza spaces can be thought of as "square space", both for the container-qualities of the physical space, and also as a referent to historical ideas of the town square or commons- a shared space that was integral to the life of the community. Of course, the "public" nature of these places constantly shifts- downtown Los Angeles, for example, is full of dysfunctional "public" plazas, which, although they are tightly controlled and constructed, are still host to subversion— from street musicians, protestors, and the occasional wild animal.

The square plays an important role in the life of a city- it is a gathering point, a shared space, a place a local community feels it has a right to, ownership of, in a way. The square is rooted in both civic and personal history, and facilitates routine and ritual. These are more permanent, determined public spaces, and they can take years to create. The Cornfields, for example, is a post-industrial wasteland adjacent to LA's Chinatown which community activists have worked to claim for a long time. With the clout of non-profit conservancy groups and local and state government, it was recently slated to become a state park. This project will take over a decade to complete, including the long public design process, the years it will take to raise the money to actually build the park, and the initial time spent to advocate for and acquire the site.

The square is a commitment.

In LA, there is a huge deficit of square space. Parks, for example, are not distributed evenly and are few and far between. The public plaza or central gathering place is almost non-existent except for commercialized or highly constructed pseudo-historic spaces like Olvera Street. In LA, the majority of public space is actually privatized space—the indoor mall, the strip mall, or the corporate plaza. Parking lots, not parks, take on the traditional functions of the town square, as was seen during the Democratic National Convention where the main gathering place was the parking lot next to the Staples Center arena.

Here and in similar cities, there has been a shift away from the square. This necessitates a shift *towards* another type of public space—that of the street. The codes of the street, however, are different than that of the square. The street is more than a conduit for people and vehicles, it also suggests movement, change, and impermanence- it is a space to pass through, to interact with people for a brief moment. It is activated by use.

The street, of course, is something LA has an overabundance of.

The street is also a place where public and private clash on a daily basis. It is a shared space in a broad sense- a triumverate of commercial, government, and human interests. Walk down most major avenues in any city and you are bombarded with advertisements; you must negotiate the line between private property and city-owned parts of the sidewalk; in some cases you may move through the space but can only loiter if you feed the parking meter.

The street (and the square) are part of the contract a city has with its citizens- provided as part of the deal which exchanges services for paying taxes, and otherwise participating in the commerce of the city. However, these spaces are often held hostage by other forces- advertising campaigns, uneven development, environmental injustice, institutionalized racism, etcetera. Citizens, activists, artists, and others can reclaim the city by appropriating these spaces for their own purposes.

The street is therefore an ideal political platform. Interventions within the street, whether in the form of art or protest, produce *conditional* public space, a temporary declaration of territorial rights, or opening up of space to new uses. This is space which Acconci says must be taken by force- although any claiming of space is an aggressive act, whether it is done by artists or by advertisers. In the end it's up to the spectators (the infamous "public"), to decide if the intervener is a revolutionary or a road hog.

Many of the interventions into the street—performed by artists, activists and other citizens—are hit-and-run —they are temporary. This is partly because of the nature of the street as a place of constant movement through. But temporality is also strategic— *place* itself can become reactive and responsive to larger events, through the actions of the people in it. Temporality preserves the element of surprise. It also means that what is produced is not monumental, permanent, or epic. These projects are effective because of their constant production and energy. Actions and interventions into the space of the street are meant to be reproduced, modified, followed, forgotten, reinvented, surpassed.

In LA, the street is the primary locus for activism and acting-out, as it is there to be intervened into. The square, conversely, is already an intervention into the city. The street and the square, however, are not completely oppositional; neither is physical public space and conditional public space. Instead, they are operational models for each other. Public and private spaces can be permeable: the function of either can be transformed momentarily using the tactics of the street, or more permanently following the model of the square.