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Public space: risk, participation and the "new mobile public"

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Abstract

The following text intends to review two art projects, the installation "Obsessions Make My Life Worse and My Work Better" by Sagmeister Inc., and "The Museum of Non Participation" by Karen Mirza and Brad Butler.

These projects are particularly interesting as both are narrative subjects and physical artefacts connected with people's everyday life in the urban context that challenge and expand our relationship with the city. They are analysed regarding their contribution to the current discussions on the concept of public, for which the issues of risk and participation at play on each of the art projects are quintessential concerning some of the most acute propositions of theorists on public life and public space.

Considering the influence that the new technologies of transportation and communication have had on the transformation of the concept of "new mobile public" and its implications on the way we understand social relations dynamics, two metaphors currently used to signify those dynamics are juxtaposed to make sense of contemporary approaches to publicness, and to acknowledge the importance of the issues of risk and participation, portrayed by the referred art projects, as a proficient way to take forward the discussion.

Keywords: Public space, public life, mobile public, risk, participation.

Risk: "Obsessions Make My Life Worse and My Work Better"



Figure 1. Art installation "Obsessions Make My Life Worse and My Work Better" by Sagmeister Inc. (Richard The, Joe Shouldice, Stefan Sagmeister) during *ExperimentaDesign*, Amsterdam 2008. Photo by Jens Rehr. Source: <http://www.sagmeister.com>.

Presented as part of the event *ExperimentaDesign Amsterdam 2008*, Sagmeister's art installation created in a public space for the project *Urban Play*¹, played an interesting and peculiar role regarding the issue of risk affecting public life and space.

The installation design done with 350,000 euro cent coins fulfils well the purpose of the project *Urban Play*. Inhabitants, visitors and the authorities became a fundamental part of the force behind the object that affected the regulation and inhabitation of public space on that particular context where the notion of risk became the trigger for the *raison d'être* of the installation.

¹ *Urban Play* is a project that aims to stimulate urban design interventions outside the formal channels of institutions, commissions and urban planning, and is part of an urban design movement often referred as *guerrilla design* or "3D Graffiti". This surge of urban creativity has among other things explored and challenged the rules of engagement between citizens and authorized urban creative expressions. While some social dogmas have dismissed most of the informal urban interventions as forms of vandalism, at the centre of this DIY urban design movement there are innovative and sophisticated urban interventions that deeply challenge and expand our relationship with the city.

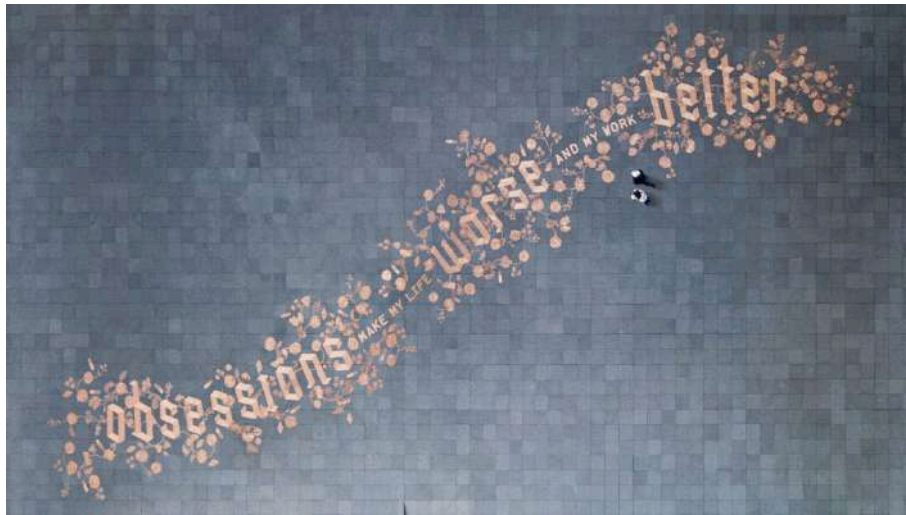


Figure 2. Art installation "Obsessions Make My Life Worse and My Work Better" by Sagmeister Inc. (Richard The, Joe Shouldice, Stefan Sagmeister) during ExperimentaDesign, Amsterdam 2008. Photo by Jens Rehr. Source: <http://www.sagmeister.com>.

Here is how the story went. In the morning of the second day of the event, a resident of an overlooking building reported to Amsterdam police that the artwork was being stolen. As a matter of fact, people were pocketing a few of the coins, which was also expected, but after being seen by the referred resident the destiny of the installation was about to change. Amsterdam police responded immediately, and in a matter of minutes as to secure the artwork, police officers swept up the entire installation (Burnham, 2008).

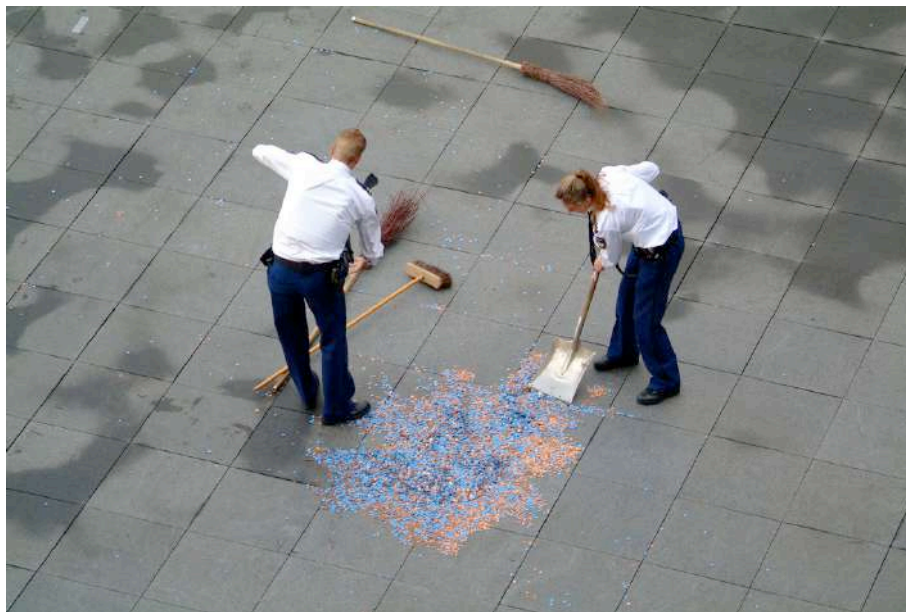


Figure 3. Art installation "Obsessions Make My Life Worse and My Work Better" by Sagmeister Inc. (Richard The, Joe Shouldice, Stefan Sagmeister) during ExperimentaDesign, Amsterdam 2008. Photo by Anjens via Flickr. Source: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/anjens>.

Whether this was an expected result for the artist it really isn't known, but one thing is certain, the calculation of perceived risk was at the centre of his work. It seems clear that by placing one euro cent coins in a public space without any police or other preventive surveillance, Sagmeister allowed the risk of someone pocketing the cent coins to be present as a part of the

installation itself ('Rule of typical things' (Gardner, 2008, p.48)). The fact that the cent coins were assembled and presented as a public piece of art (notably figurative), and not letting anyone know that to pocket the coins was part of the installation, made the act of pocketing a cent coin to be quite a more risky act comparing with pocketing a lost cent coin somewhere else, even considering such little monetary value. In fact it allowed that act to be taken as it usually is, as an act of destruction, vandalism and robbery of a public object of art, or even an act liable of causing public disorder. However, people still did pocketed some coins despite the consequences they might have considered ('The example rule' (Gardner, 2008, p.54)), where to do it or not depended on one's point of view when in interaction with it and the perceived notion of the actual risks involved in the action.

The fact that the installation was placed in that particular place, i.e. a place that allowed the existence of the risk of surveillance by inhabitants that would report to the police if they saw someone pocketing from it, made possible the engagement of many people that played out in many different levels the perception of risk in a public space. But more specifically it allowed the city to be used as a place for risky public urban interventions where even city authorities could play an important role in challenging its notion of perceived and actual risk, even if they ended up eventually sweeping up an entire installation with a rather odd efficiency (see video in http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=av4mLRiCAxo&feature=player_embedded).

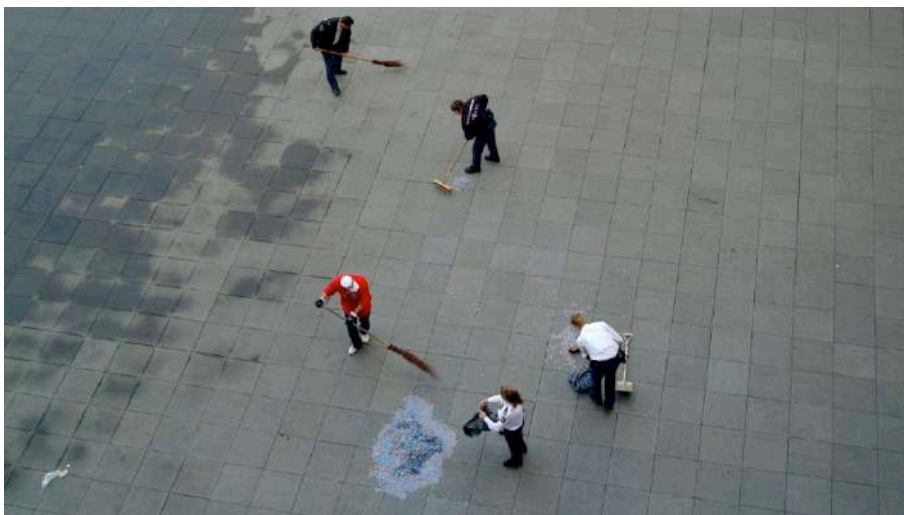


Figure 4. Art installation "Obsessions Make My Life Worse and My Work Better" by Sagmeister Inc. (Richard The, Joe Shouldice, Stefan Sagmeister) during *ExperimentaDesign*, Amsterdam 2008. Photo by Jens Rehr. Source: <http://www.sagmeister.com>.

Risk here was used as a way to make clearer the limitations that, preconceptions of fear, public art and of crime have. Nor the individuals that pocketed considered well the consequences of their acts in relation to others that wanted to maintain the piece as it was originally, neither the resident acted in regard of the collective freedom that one could have in the physical transformation of that piece, nor the police considered the fact that the city

authorities might have allowed the pocketing of the installation. However, the truth is that the installation couldn't have been more successful in its achievements.

This public art installation does make one wonder about the epistemology of risk played out in current public life and spaces. How is that the isolation from the engagement with this particular type of risk in a public space is helping to create better public spaces, conscientious public space users and citizens in general, when it prevents us from experiencing richer social interactions that interesting and harmless public space physical transformations can conceive? Does this kind of interaction and physical transformation represent a risk too far from becoming beneficial for society as a whole? This is clearly a case where one can note how self-limited one have become when, to be concerned with preventing the worst, means limiting the will to attain something better out of public life and public spaces (Beck, 1992, p.49).



Figure 5. Art installation "Obsessions Make My Life Worse and My Work Better" by Sagmeister Inc. (Richard The, Joe Shouldice, Stefan Sagmeister) during ExperimentaDesign, Amsterdam 2008. Photo by Anjens via Flickr. Source: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/anjens>.

Participation: "The Museum of Non Participation"



Figure 6. Cross-cultural artistic investigation project "Museum of Non Participation" by artists Karen Mirza and Brad Butler. 'Museum Banner Intervention', Karachi, 2008. Photo by Karen Mirza and Brad Butler. Source: www.mirza-butler.net

It all began during the protests of the Pakistani Lawyers Movement in Islamabad. Two artists - Karen Mirza and Brad Butler - were visiting the National Art Gallery, and from one of the exhibition rooms they experienced an odd sensation by witnessing through the window the protests, which at that moment had turned violent. It strongly impressed them, because standing within a contested image space - the art gallery - they were looking out to another much localized contested space with a highly charged sight image of real violence.

This event gave origin to Mirza and Butler's cross-cultural artistic investigation project "The Museum of Non Participation" (see Artangel, 2009). The idea was to create a museum as a pop-up institution that would appropriate the city as its space and artefact, and have its citizens as both museum users and makers. The project plays out in many different manifestations such as conversations, activities and narratives following strands of dialogue to different people, places and contexts. The image on Figure 6 is a small, but nevertheless important part of that manifestations, where we see a part of a decrepit public space in Karachi with one of the text banners that demarcated the museum in the city, announcing a new way of moving through and looking at the city, in which the group of children became part as both museum subjects and museum users. The image shows the importance of the use of text in the city to provoke discussion, which in turn informs the artists work and lead to further queries and concerns.

In sum, both image and text opens up the space for conversations that discover the patterns and realities of everyday life with other languages and voices than just the ones portrayed by western media. This generates networks of knowledge and people that in turn form themselves their spaces of resistance. Image here is also turned into a vehicle that within the globalized world of conflict restrictions and social and economic divisions engages with the question of the

spatiality of public participation and non-participation in a global level, whether in Karachi, London or elsewhere.

The concept of museum that the art project conceived is oscillating between object and process, and goes back to the Greek notion of museum as a borderless extension between art and life, a place for a dynamic and continuous learning. It questions the overused word participation, and from it other concepts are questioned such as, space of resistance, city, architecture and democracy, image and language. Non participation here is used as a concept of provocation, a paradox that playfully engages the discussion about the problem of public participation and non participation, and makes us think about our choices, needs and motivations when we participate, whether in places such as Karachi or elsewhere. However, by exposing the raw reality of Karachi, where geopolitical dynamics increase the need to participate in movements of violent resistance, it challenges the meanings of our own condition in the contexts where we participate.

This project questions notions of publicness, participation and democracy by contrasting the western notion of museum spaces and living standards, and the cruel reality of the way of life lived by most of Karachi's population, that in contrast with the air conditioned car owners, have to depend on basic survival strategies in order to survive, such is the brutality of this city, victim of massive confluence of global capital.

Public space and the concept of "new mobile public"

Public space is a term that has been in critical scrutiny since the "fall of the ancient regime and the formation of a new capitalist, secular, urban culture" (Sennett, 1977, p.16). It has been the centre of important debates within various disciplines such as philosophy, geography, visual art, cultural and social studies, architecture and urban design. Questions such as, "what makes a space public?", "who is the public?" and "how research should serve the public interest since that interest is nearly impossible to find?" (Staeheil and Mitchell, 2007, p.793), have become the centres of controversial perspectives by scholars, activists and formal political bodies.

Its definition as it is usually settled by government's public laws, might be abstractly translated as: a space legally defined within a defined time by the public law of a certain territory, that applies to a specific group of individuals, in terms of its use, ownership and reason of being, and besides having or not an identifiable material form, it is a fundamental arena for defining and sustaining human individualism and collectivism. As any other term defined by law, it counteracts anarchy and exists as a mediation tool with which a certain society can operate with, in order to compromise individually on the definition of certain spaces for a better functioning of the collective as a whole. Therefore as in an effort to protect the balance and order of a certain group in a certain society it becomes a "bubble" concept that becomes

effective as far as the dynamic balance between what it includes and excludes doesn't cause the "bubble" to burst.

Whatever the legal definitions of the term, being them more or less inclusive or more or less flexible, and independently from taking a pro-individualism or pro-collectivism approach, the term public space is directly concerned with the expression of our most inherent human condition: the relation between the self and the other. The definition by law of this relation is highly political, therefore the term and public spaces themselves become more richly and responsibly humanized as far as this relation tends to be played in behalf of the free, equal and caring human relations, expressions and political influences, whether played inside or outside the "bubble".

Currently, literature on the subject suggests that public space in the western world doesn't represent anymore the space of the public but just of a narrowly prescribed part of it (Mitchell, 1995, p.120). For many critics this is, due to modern principles, of a highly commodified spectacle nature, devised for profit, safety and to maintain social and political stability, which have determinant implications on the exchange value of human relations. This has created spaces that don't allow for direct, mediation-free, social interaction in public, which decreases people interaction with the real public (i.e. the public that encompasses everyone including homeless and political activists) whose legitimacy as members of the public is becoming unfairly doubtful (Mitchell, 1995, p.120).

According to Mimi Sheller, mobile publics have now new ways of mobilization and spatialization that underpin public participation and thus affect public life in general (Sheller, 2003).

Although there is still little research on the actual effects of the new forms of publics, the study of their particular messier and "gelling" dynamics will enable a better understanding of the nature of the new mobile social interactions.

The introduction of new communication technologies in the everyday life of contemporary societies all over the world, have allowed for an increasing social, political and cultural participation of the most marginalized people and regions. Nevertheless they also might be a threat to publicness and social interaction, leading to the decline of democratic participation, civic cohesion and in sum of social capital.

At the end of 2009, according to the International Telecommunication Union there were approximately 4.6 billion mobile cellular subscriptions worldwide, with the tendency to keep rising in number and in technological development, as "the barrier between cell phones and computers is getting lower" (Nagata, 2009). In fact mobile phones have had extensive cultural and social implications as it changes the nature of communication and affects identities and relationships. According to Dr. Sadie Plant (2006, p.23), "it affects the development of social structures and economic activities, and has considerable bearing on its users perceptions of themselves and their world". Some interesting facts came out from a study on mobiles directed by Dr. Plant:

For some people, the effortless contacts and fleeting noncommittal messages made possible by the mobile are ways of avoiding more immediate and forthcoming kinds of interaction. One Japanese service allows users to court 'virtual girlfriends' by mobile phone and many teenagers have dozens, sometimes hundreds of *meru tomo*, 'email friends', who may never meet and only ever know each other through the *keitai*. Many of these friendships involve constructed personalities and sometimes complex webs of multiple personas and duplicitous affairs. For some teenagers, such virtual friends can act as substitutes for actual friends, just as video games can replace their real lives. One Japanese student expressed concerns that younger *keitai* users are becoming less capable of direct, social communications. They rely on technology to converse. They are often intelligent with collecting information but not with utilising it, and I am often surprised by their awkward emotional responses. (Plant, 2006, p.59).

Several contributors argued that the mobile leaves people unable to appreciate the challenges and opportunities 'dead time' can present. In Chicago, a group of young intellectuals expressed the concern that such connectivity might even undermine people's self-reliance, making them unable to operate alone, and leaving them dependent on the mobile as a source of assistance and advice. Rarely stranded incommunicado, the person with a mobile is less exposed to the vagaries of chance, unlikely to be thrown onto resources of their own, or to encounter adventure, surprise, or the happiest of accidents. (Plant, 2006, p.61).

With the new dynamics brought by new technologies of transportation and communication a new social and spatial order, acknowledged by Castells as the "space of flows", or by some urban geographers as "the 'liquefaction' of the urban structure", public life have become inherently affected for which the notion of risk and participation play a major role.

Sheller asks two fundamental questions on this regard: "What mechanisms animate liquid sociality? What agencies are at work to make social connections gel or evaporate?" (Sheller, 2003, p.47). Many pessimists see this "liquid sociality" as a threat to social capital itself, which can be exemplified why this might be true, by analogy to the cases of risk and participation explored above. In both cases, the isolation from the engagement with public life and spaces did produce attitudes of carelessness towards public life and spaces, as it prevented from knowing the effect of such engagement on the space and on others. Nevertheless, the answer to the first question can show us something else. The mechanisms that animated the "liquid sociality" were in fact very tangible and physical, and their impact had bigger effects, arguably because they operated within the physical dimension of public space. The entry of this very tangible and public happening into the called "liquid sociality" happened just afterwards, amplified by the new technologies of communication: the cameras that registered the scenes, the internet used to exhibit/promote and discuss the trickle down effects of Sagmeister's installation and Mirza and Butler's art project, etc.

In answer to the second question, the fact that there has been an increasing disengagement with public physical/live communicational experiences can perhaps be said to be the cause why, in the case of Sagmeister's installation, the person who reported the robbery did report

the robbery even before engaging into conversation with the person who was pocketing the coins, or even considering that pocketing the coins wasn't in fact a robbery.

We can speculate about the many reasons why she did it, and we also can speculate about the many reasons why the lawyers protest trickled down into the Museum of Non-participation art project, but the fact is that the installation and the museum "evaporated" physically, but not entirely. Quite the opposite. The disappearance of the physical artefact, generated a disproportional amplified counter effect through the new technologies of communication, which allowed the "gelification" of many more social interactions than it would have otherwise allowed if the artefact existed solely in its physical form.

There seems to be no straight answers to whether the "liquid socialities" and "spaces of flows" created by the new mobile public are indeed more beneficial or more detrimental to public life and public spaces. However, it is clear that a new sort of network beyond the network theory perspective is now a given reality. Intrinsic and instrumental aspects of publicness brought by the new mobile public must be now understood in the light of its own complexities. Although the complexity of the issue can often blur the way forward, complexity isn't the reason to current parasitical spaces of public action (see Barnett, 2008). As Barnett argues, "in democratic theory, publicness is instrumentally related to maintaining the legitimacy of binding collective decision-making", however, powerful forces of privatization, social exclusion, and inequalities are jeopardizing the way to a more democratic participative living, where it becomes important to identify the possibilities of the new mobile public as instrumental for an agonistic conflictual-consensus participation² for which the understanding and the use of the understanding of the concepts of risk and participation play a fundamental role.

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² The concept of "agonistic participation" is based on the studies developed by the political scientist Chantal Mouffe about the model of "agonistic democracy" (see Mouffe, 2005), which in general terms advocates the importance of the creation of a symbolic space of constructive struggle between different interpretations of shared principles.

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