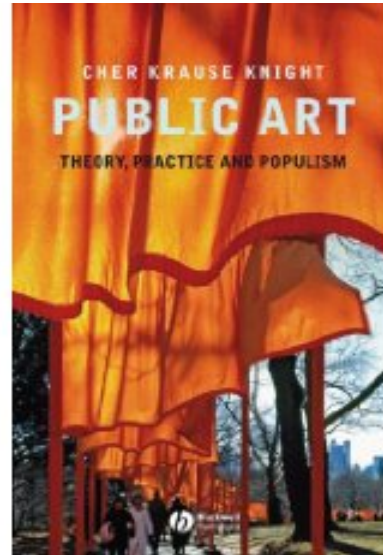


Cher Krause Knight, **Public Art: Theory, Practice and Populism**, 2008, Blackwell Publishing, 187 pp., \$26.95 (paperback).

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Cher Krause Knight boldly begins her book by pronouncing, “I cannot think of a single book on public art that commences with Marcel Duchamp.” She prefaces her book with an epigraph from Duchamp’s 1957 essay, “The Creative Act,” promising the reader a novel and provocative study of public art. Although the subtitle of the book includes “theory, practice, and populism,” it is really the latter that forms the framework and ensures its novelty. Duchamp believed in the “power of the spectator,” whose engagement and interpretation complete “the creative act” of the artist. What Duchamp called the “art coefficient,” Krause describes as a gap between artistic intention and realization — much like the hermeneutic gap that claims one can never truly know or understand the original word of God, placing tremendous import on interpretation and intervention. Yet the real problem with public art is rather the gap between idealism and realism. The ideal is to present an unbiased, communal, and unmediated artistic experience to the public. The reality of public art is that there are many layers of bureaucratic intervention (corporate and governmental) required to facilitate this ideal artistic experience, often invisible to the unassuming public, but always present. Krause talks much of the ideal in her book, giving examples to support what she deems to be successful populist programs and projects, but the realistic part of public art is too often condemned in a manner that appears biased and judgmental.

Krause’s emphasis on the populist nature of public art is a good reminder of its ideal goals, as well as the crucial role of the viewer. She raises important questions about the intentions of public art, but is decidedly wary of how populist are museums, developers, and city officials in their present state. She touts the great advantages of universities, television, malls, public foundations, and nonprofit organizations to facilitate populist opportunities for engaging with art, but fails to mention that all these media can just as easily have their own agendas, biased board members and shareholders, and preferred artists with whom to work. Krause does offer hope that museums can provide visitors a populist art experience by loosening their grip on “the authoritative or exclusive stance of historical interpretation or aesthetic judgment” (p. 64).

When discussing populism and public art, it is critical to separate visitor perception of museums as elite and unapproachable, and the current reality of their practices, a distinction that Krause does not clearly make. She states, “If museums persist in using dialects of specialized knowledge only discernible

to ears of the uninitiated, those who cannot understand are soon disenfranchised, feeling detached and even resentful" (p. 63). Krause offers numerous suggestions with which to combat this perception, including artist residencies, artist-run workshops, artist-led tours, public input on collections management, building campaigns, and co-curated exhibitions. She also cites successful examples such as the Fast Forward teen program and the Vita Brevis public art program, both at the Boston Institute for Contemporary Art. While Krause's suggestions are valid, most museums have already incorporated artists, teenagers, and community members in their programming. Educational programming in museums regularly offers discussions with artists; multimedia tours give a platform for artists and others to voice their opinions; and there are numerous museum teen programs that curate exhibitions and conduct interviews (MoMA, Bronx Museum of the Arts, Walker Art Center, Whitney Museum of American Art). The Los Angeles County Museum of Art has engaged artists to install recent exhibitions (John Baldessari, Jorge Pardo), and have a history of creating community advisory groups to accompany large-scale exhibitions, particularly surrounding exhibitions of Mexican and Latino art.

Although Krause warns about dealing in binaries such as art elitists versus populists, this theme is carried throughout the book. As she says

Generally, elitists emphasize the need for professionalism and formal education in the arts, art-specific institutions, and standards of quality according to established canons of taste . . . they are perceived as centurions standing guard over and imposing their culture on others. Conversely, populists usually argue for the widest possible availability of art experiences, welcome cultural diversity, and promote public (often 'amateur') participation in and experiential relationships to art." (p. ix)

Krause declares that museums "enact tensions not only between notions of the 'public' and 'private,' but between the 'communal' and personal" (p. 62). She says that an "us versus them mentality" presides at museums (p. 63), and that museums symbolically "sift out the 'haves' from the 'have-nots'" (p. 60). Krause quotes Margaret Wyszomirski, who compares the "quest for excellence and the quest of equality," James Young who talks about "patronizing mass tastes," Andrew Ross, Craig Owens, Martha Rosler, Hilde Hein, and many others who also attest to the elite nature of museums. Krause does cite an exception — the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum (Fenway Court) in Boston — which is unconventional in its museography. She cites populist practices here such as "minimal labeling or explanatory texts within this purposefully de-institutionalized context of affluent domesticity." It is surprising that Krause finds populism in what she calls a "blatant presentation of a lifestyle we can try on but most could never afford." She compares this to another private collection, the exhibition *Things I Love: The Many Collections of William I. Koch* at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA). The key factor in this comparison appears to be motive, as the Gardner Museum has remained true to its founder (a legal requirement), while Krause questions the MFA's motives in mounting Mr. Koch's private collection, endorsing his "tastes and agenda," and enfolding "Koch's vision into its own."

Location is another matter critical to the discussion of public art. Krause correctly states that what makes art public is not necessarily its location, but its "content and manner of construction." She discusses the Athenian agora and Habermas's public sphere in reference to the "noblest function" of public

art to “nurture participatory citizenship” and “create an unfettered intellectual space for debate and socio-political engagement” (p. 38). It is this populist nature of public art that frees it from any physical space, and from our stereotypes and expectations. Krause provides examples such as the bronze Rocky statue at the steps outside the Philadelphia Museum of Art (2006), which was successful in drawing a great number of new visitors to the museum and as a symbol of mass culture, but was “unpopulist” in the process by which it was installed, involving “political clout, star power, and private agendas” (pp. 98-99). On the contrary, the exhibition *Listening Post* (2006) at the San Jose Museum of Art is cited as a populist art project that enlists visitors as collaborators, albeit in a private museum that charges an entrance fee.

Public participation is critical to Krause’s condition for populism in art, and she provides an extensive discussion of earthworks, graffiti art, muralism, and performance art. Even the act of providing an audience to isolated works of art is important to the project’s existence and success. Krause mentions how memorial spaces are incomplete until they are filled with the memories of visitors. Yet the difficulty is that with most of these art forms, location becomes an inescapably important component. In discussing Walter de Maria’s *Lightening Field* (1997), Krause talks about the artist’s “exhaustive multi-year search for the ultimate location.” Similarly, muralists, taggers, and performers are very attentive to the particular place in which they situate their work. Yet again, the distinction must be made between artistic intention of location and public reception of such location. While location is important to most artists, Krause’s determination of populism lies more in the work’s accessibility, its contextualization, and its degree of public engagement. Further attesting to the importance of location, Krause compares two sites in Chicago, the Harold Washington Library Center’s public art program (installed in 1991) and Millennium Park. The site of the Joseph Kosuth work at the library’s “extravagant” foyer is unwelcoming and the art “does not distinguish itself enough,” Krause states. The foyer is used mainly for private functions, as is the Chicago Authors Meeting Room, where more public art hangs. Krause cites the success of public art at Millennium Park is attributed to not “isolating art from other daily functions.” Furthermore, she states that Amish Kapoor’s *Cloud Gate* and Jaume Plensa’s *Crown Fountain* both “demystify art in a way their neighbor, the Art Institute of Chicago, is less likely to do” (p. 153). According to Krause, populist art is about making art understandable; something that is not likely to happen at museums and other elite institutions. We have clarified Krause’s belief that populism with public art is about people not feeling intimidated and having “reasonable and fair” opportunities for participation, interaction, and understanding. It is about the work not being institutionalized nor commercialized, but rather about the importance of socially relevant messages. Physical, emotional, and intellectual accessibility is all required for populist art.

Ultimately, the key to determining the success of public art is to be found within that notorious gap, the gap between intention and realization, between idealism and realism. And working inside that gap — or rather intervening — is the pile of city commissioners, bureaucrats, developers, and elite museum professionals that Krause tends to criticize in favor of universities, nonprofits, and more. Krause neglects to mention the role of city commissioners that, contrary to the private developers that she criticizes, do understand the economic and cultural histories of a place because they live there and are often as diverse as the communities which they represent. Acting as liaisons between city officials and the community, city arts commissions must legally hear public commentary before they make any decision regarding the approval of a public art commission. And often city arts commissioners have seats on design commissions to provide additional guidance to developers regarding public art. But the museum is

probably the most notorious of all gaps — acting as intermediary between the artist and the viewer by providing a physical space, an historical context, a scholarly interpretation, and increasingly opportunities for visitor participation, interaction, and individual meaning making.

It is unfortunate that there was no mention about Jean Piaget, constructivism, and his model of active learning. The popularity of this theory has recently reemerged in art education and museum studies while museums accept the active nature of the modern visitor, and more significantly, the need for visitors to participate and create in order to generate lasting learning experiences based on assimilation and individualization. Through new technologies, museums have been seeking new and creative ways in which to communicate their expertise to visitors, and to help visitors construct subjective meanings. Krause does acknowledge that “museums cater to wider patronage than ever before, providing more interactive, immersive experiences for these visitors,” but states that they “are still likely to impose institutional agendas upon them.” (p. 50). So if we remove the active viewer from such an imposing and institutional space, does populist art close the gap and bring the viewer closer to original intention? Can we ever realistically eliminate the gap even with the ideal aspirations of public/populist art? A discussion of constructivism and populism raises even deeper questions about intention. Is populism a reaction to a more active, engaged, and demanding public? How are public artists, consultants, curators, cities, and alternative spaces reacting to the active viewer, and how do their (re)actions compare to museums?

Populism comes from Latin “populus” meaning the people, but it has become politicized through the ages to mean certain groups of people, usually those groups that are in opposition to the status quo. The term “masses” has taken on leftist, socialist tones, referring to the underserved, minorities, impoverished, and underrepresented, often the colonized and the politically oppressed. By using the term populist, Krause invokes all of these historical (and present) references, placing on a pedestal the very binaries that she warns about. Krause’s championing of the populist public art experience is valid as a personal opinion, but it would be more provocative and novel if it were stated as such unapologetically from the beginning instead of surreptitiously hidden just beneath the surface. Krause makes a concerted effort to include all the major contributors to the fields of art history, museums, and public art, but it is often difficult to ascertain her own opinions because of her extensive reliance on outside sources. She includes all the major scholars — enough to fill 18 pages of bibliography. On top of including statements from their writings, she frequently cites sources in the middle or at the end of her statements that create a great deal of confusion as to whether the idea she is putting forth is an original one or merely repeated.

In my personal opinion, a successful public art project does not need to be populist. Not every viewer wants to participate, to learn, and to be inspired for critical inquiry; some viewers simply notice a strange or beautiful object on their way to work each day without ever understanding or engaging it, and it may still create meaning in their lives. But what Duchamp, Krause, and Piaget remind us is that the opportunity must be provided. A work of art is hardly ever kept in complete isolation (even an artist’s studio provides a contextual relationship), and within the gap where intervention and interpretation must ultimately occur, the viewer should be considered foremost. But we must acknowledge the audience — a changing viewer, an unpredictable and diverse viewer, or as Krause states, the “continual flux of community.”