

## ART IN PUBLIC SPACE AND ITS FUNCTIONS

### OBSERVATIONS RELATED TO SWEDISH ACTIVITIES SINCE 1960

by

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Even if there was a proposition passed in the Swedish parliament just before the second world war saying that at least 1 % of the total building costs for any public institution should be used for artistic elements in the milieu, this never was realised because of the economic strain in the early forties, and after 1940 few public constructions were realised. It was the housing sector of the construction activities which demanded all resources at that time, and not before after 1955 it became common to place a work of art in a recent housing area. But in the early sixties quite a series of decision from the side of the state, as well as new facilities for the housing enterprises gave a very much widened possibility for integrating art works in collective and even private housing areas and localities for common use even if not "monumental" in character.

During the period 1961-69 especially there was a fervent activity in the artistic circles to cover the demands, and many artists found most of their living in demands from the public authorities or from the housing enterprises. The growth of the public demands gave opportunities to develop new types of art works for the new areas and localities. It is true that professional art criticism consecrated and still consecrates astonishingly little newspaper space and interest to this sector of the artistic life, but the works themselves form a very substantial discussion which has forwarded a lot of new functions and solutions and which reflects a good deal of conscience of the problems which are to be treated above all in this communication: those of not only making a fair work of art but also giving this art a possibility to reach attention and understanding by the people living near it.

The meaning of all this has been vigorously contested from two sides: on the one side by the younger architects who often see just the spending of economic resources on objects which they judge not to function in relation to the people of the area, on the other side by the artists and critics having a purely communicative aesthetics and wanting art to express problems of the day as well as to forward ideas which are part of the political and social actuality. The latter attitude has given rise to very few art works in public space, since the responsible groups mostly don't admit those ideas and since most of the public saw and still sees art for the common urban space not as temporary exhibits but as pieces of eternity.



This unrest was stirred up about at the same time as there was a major difficulty in the general economy of the country, and there was a sensible decline in the demands for art in this context. During the years 1969-72 it seems that the decline was aggravating, after that there have been signs of a recovery. But the uncertainty of the responsables, of the architects, of the artis themselves, has given good reasons to look into the conditions under which art functions and might function in public space.

I have been responsible of a pilote study of those problems two years ago, and we are at present preparing a much more complete investigation. On the same time as I will try to present some recent Swedish contributions, it is my intention to deal a lot about those problems and preliminary observations coming from our investigations.

While the critic is working under ideal conditions so far that he is allowed to assume that his reader has the same general artistic references and the same trained visual sensitivity as he or she - or is striving to acquire all that by adapting the critic's standards - most of the people who are to live near those recent works of the public space are fairly untouched by all those references and evaluations and would not seldom find the critic's values just meaningless. It might thus seem almost meaningless also to the art critic or art historian to study the real conditions for that art - why not leave this study for the sociologues? But there are some reasons to consider:

Firstly: "general man" has as aesthetic attitude not just prejudices, and it is then not only question of a want for realism and idyllic themes or so. Populär aesthetics is quite a system, not least covering the concept of public art works. We have to look into that system in order to understand how works of art might function in relation to this.

Secondly, "specialists" very seldom have a very elaborate idea about art in public space, they are not infrequently inclined to use the standards developed from the exhibition art for any situation, even when concerning the spaces of collective life.

Thirdly, to measure "aesthetic reactions" gives even the behavioural specialists (psychologists, sociologists) more problems than they can handle. When trying they certainly measure something, but what?

Much in recent experiences and theories on art talks for the idea that we must find ways back to historical methods also to explain the present attitudes and values of the general public (or, if we consider the relation to exhibition art, mostly "the non-public"). Not least to explain the use people make of art we have to rely upon historical rather than psychologi-



cal explanations. Behind attitudes - and the individual's aesthetic in function is an attitude - there are always elements of tradition and those traditions are united in a more or less coherent system of references and values which is the individual's ideological basis. Part of this ideology is formed by general history of art and by classical tradition, not least as it has been forwarded by conventional teaching for more than hundred years.

But the situation of the "non-public" even if uninterested in and/or unaware of modern art, is different from that of european man hundred years ago. Even in a metropolis like Paris or Berlin the number of new visual impressions which reached a person during the day might have been counted on the fingers of one hand. Today we face half a dozen of posters and signs a day, meet new pictures in the newspaper and still new ones in the television in the evening, and the apartment is full of smaller and bigger things which are certainly familiar, but who form together a dense fabric of visual variation. What says that modern man in this situation is needing the same types of public adornments as were actual for his grandfathers?

Leaving the general consideration it can be stated that at least actual Swedish public strongly tend to maintain classical criteria of public art, which means that statue, park group, fountain, "fresco" (which stands for all sorts of murals) and busts are the normal categories, and that those have their normal and suitable outer context. There are places which should normally be favoured with a specific type of art work - as the main place of a city, the most representational spaces of the city hall. There are others who are considered as well fit for receiving art works, like schools and hospitals. For the new housing areas, there has been little tradition, and according to that there is much uncertainty. But there are obvious formulas which make up for the indecision: when the housing area is big enough, and remote enough from the city center, then it seems to be generally favourably accepted when a sculpture or a mural is offered for the local shopping center or service area. It seems that this is taken as a sign of urbanity, it gives some sort of local cultural autonomy to the area in question.

And when the open spaces between the houses are sufficiently alike a park, the presence of a sculpture there might add to that aspect and may be especially well met by the people of the area.

But what here is stated is valid only if the work of art in question responds sufficiently to the idea most people make about the type of monument related to that function. As soon as the criteria of the art works differ too much from tradition, the result may be a more negative judgment than would be formulated in front of the same work seen at an exhibition.



It doesn't add to our understanding if we label this attitude as "conservative" because that conservatism is proper to man and its adaption to modern art is directly related to the amount of experience of art accessible to the actual person. We easily forget that even we critics form constantly new conventions or remodel old ones to give us the possibility to accept new art forms.

Of course Swedish public is more favourable to realistic and idyllic works than to most nonfigurative and certainly more favourable to them than to works with deformations of realistic forms. But the tendency to favour mimesis is not extremely strong, and when trying to explore individual "taste-patterns" I have found that more than 30% of the subjects preferred in reality other qualities than resemblance and were inclined to favour a modern work with the formal qualities they liked before a simple realistic work the formal qualities of which seemed uninteresting to them.

When questioning a group of people concerning public art works in their neighbourhood, works from the last ten years. I mostly recieved other responses than I got when examining their taste concerning pictures. I think the difference is due to the censorship exerted by the conceptual premises of the individual: people judged first the type, then the individual.

At least, it seemed so. But may I recall an experiment made six years ago by a group of psychologists and me in Lund? We showed a series of pictures to a group of students, first each picture very rapidly, then more and more slowly. Finally they all could discern and describe what they saw. But asked to give their associations already when first they had a glimpse of the picture, they noted impressions which gave together a very composite emotional description of the work - and in each case those descriptions were better fitted to the analysis of the same work made by a specialist knowing the background etc. than was their final judgment. This means, at least I think so, that the order is inverse: the spontaneous, "real" reaction on the work of art as an individual expression comes first, then comes the control of the ideological system, and the report of the evaluation is thus strongly imprinted by the cultural ideology of the individual. It is "moralised".

We have reason to believe that a work of art would have better opportunity to be judged in better accordance to the individual's personal possibilities and inclinations if it was related to an accepted function than if it was introduced in the environment as a foreign, "unidentified object". This can be further elucidated by the very obvious difference of the to-



larent attitude most people showed to sculptures intended to serve the play of children when compared with the attitude to equally "unrealistic" or deformative works without that context. And this is the more remarkable as there was a very prominent tendency not only not to like but clearly to reject naive and naivistic art in the visual test series shown apart to the subjects. Even if the "play sculpture" was naivist in form or colour it was more accepted than the Klee painting, for instance. Several commentaries made evident that they didn't want artists to be childish, but to be clever, artful, to perform difficult things. And works which seemed evidently to be difficult could be accepted without hindrance of any realistic attitude.

In the Stockholm Underground there has recently been inaugurated an artistic arrangement of the station Tekniska Högskolan. The totality is not "realistic", but a suggestive colouring of the mere rock, into which is introduced scientific symbols and geometric figures. This is liked by most spectators and attracts attention during the waiting time - it seems that the obvious relation to the symbols of the technique and the vicinity to the Polytechnical institute gives the forms a sufficient explanation. Wells and fountains are almost generally accepted - on the condition that they function - and this has not much to do with the differences in the sculptural forms. Water, introduced to the artificial urban area is popular. Most people tell, when asked, that they lack nature more than anything in their everyday surrounding, and water pouring forth from a mound may perhaps give some sensation of the elements of nature otherwise missing.

If the pleasure offered to children or water introduced in the artificial environment both help the understanding or rather the acceptance of the work of art, there is on the other hand clear signs that general defaults of the housing area, for instance, may contribute to block the understanding or acceptance of an art work even if it has nothing to do with the real default. When the area is quite new and all facilities are not yet there, the environment still unfinished, then most reactions to art works already on its place are probably to be harsh or uninterested. But when the area is complete, and if it is popular, this may help a good deal to the positive feelings for the work of art.

You will find that I have, out of my preliminary experiences, talked not about artistic achievements, but about conditions necessary for that people should begin to consider the work of art on its own qualities. I confess that this is not much of an art criticism. But I think it is practical and that we may help art by this sorts of investigations.