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II.9 Poetry as Public Art

In the digital age, poetry has found its way into various urban spaces – such forms of poetry as “public art” will be introduced here. Poetry projects in cities are an astonishingly diverse and apparently global phenomenon. They range from informal actions, such as poems on paper, pinned to trees in parks or recited in pedestrian zones, to image campaigns by public transport companies that create a little space for poetry alongside billboards and screens, to huge artistic light projections of poems that visually dominate central squares in a city for a given time. Public poetry festivals – the most prominent being *O, Miami* in Southern Florida (cf. Benthien and Gestrung 2023, Ch. 5; see Benthien 2024) – bring poetry to the people through creative event formats (→ II.2 LIVE ORAL POETRY). Poetry in public space can address consumption, capitalism, or unfreedom, and thus pose political questions (→ II.8 POLITICAL AND ACTIVIST POETRY); it can bring people with different backgrounds into contact with each other, but it can also simply serve the goals of giving poetry a new public, or of beautification. In addition to such urban forms, some poets and conceptual artists create poetry installations in rural landscapes, another variant of site-specific public art. Presenting poems publicly is not an exclusively recent phenomenon – for instance, there is a long tradition of wall poems, either on panels or as inscriptions into a façade (see Klimmek 2020) – but it seems to be gaining popularity in the present, corresponding to the general trend of multilayered and intermedial forms of poetic expression in (post-)digital culture.

Poetry in public spaces: Theoretical background

When examining poetry in public spaces, three theoretical approaches are particularly relevant: the debate on the public sphere initiated by Jürgen Habermas, urban sociological concepts surrounding public space, and cultural studies and art theory contributions to concepts of public art.

Habermas (1991 [1962]) examines the way a public sphere beyond the family and the state emerged in the eighteenth century in literary salons, coffee houses, and voluntary associations. He sees the development of this autonomous sphere, in which citizens can debate their concerns, as a central foundation of a deliberative democracy. However, already by the nineteenth century, according to his analysis, the decay of the bourgeois public sphere had begun, as public affairs

increasingly became a matter for the emerging mass media. Critics have drawn particular attention to the problematic exclusivity of the concept of the bourgeois public sphere as envisioned by Habermas, which seems to be essentially a concept for upper-class males, while largely excluding women, as well as workers and members of minority groups (see Allen 2012; Fraser 2017). Recent discussions, furthermore, address the significance of digitalization and transnationalization for a contemporary understanding of the public sphere (see Seeliger and Sevignani 2021; Habermas 2022). The debate oscillates between the presumption that new forms of platform communication are damaging the self-perception of the political public as such, and a consideration of them as merely a new phase of the public sphere.

Public urban spaces are characterized by a “heterogeneity of actors,” by frequent encounters with strangers, and by a “spatial density of interactions” (Häußermann 2005, 238). Particularly in big cities, social relations are functional and segmented. Urbanity, on the one hand, enables individualization, but on the other strongly affects human behavior by creating distance between city dwellers. Georg Simmel calls this mental state a “protection of the inner life against the domination of the metropolis” (Simmel 2002, 12). Public space can be characterized by accessibility, anonymity, and behavioral openness (see Gestring et al. 2005). Accessibility implies that, in principle, there are no barriers such as entrance fees, restrictions, or even access bans. Anonymity means that no formal identification is required, entitling to everyone the right and actual possibility to move around without identity control. Behavioral openness indicates that – within a given legal framework – there are no controls or parameters for behavior: In public space, people can, for instance, wait, consume, stroll, walk, and play. Popular thinking about urban spaces is often still determined by the polarity of public and private. In the contemporary reality of cities, however, such a stark distinction has become questionable. The sociological debate about urban public spaces is characterized by a particular attention to processes of privatization, surveillance, commercialization, gentrification, touristification, etc., which ultimately amounts to a differentiation of city spaces. Because public spaces are changing, they can no longer be adequately captured by the polarity of public and private use, but rather by an interpenetration of these spheres (see Lofland 1989; Wehrheim 2012). Shopping malls, airports, railway stations, and other “non-places” of transit and consumption (Augé 2006 [1992]) are examples of spaces that are private in the legal dimension but public in social perception and use.

The contributions of art theory and cultural studies to public art show references to Habermas’ theory of the public sphere as well as to the urban sociological debate on public spaces. “Public art” or “art in public space” refers to artworks and contextual art practices commissioned for specific sites, beyond

conventional art venues. Cameron Cartiere distinguishes four dimensions of the attribute “public” that are not only relevant for visual arts but for poetry as well:

1. in a place accessible or visible to the public: *in public*
2. concerned with or affecting the community or individuals: *public interest*
3. maintained for or used by the community or individuals: *public place*
4. paid for by the public: *publicly funded* (Cartiere 2008, 15).

Dimensions 1 and 3 differ only gradually – the first emphasizes general accessibility, the second the spatial location of an artwork. That art is in the public interest and publicly funded are two dimensions also relevant for some public poetry projects. The central feature of public art is its free accessibility, which does not, however, guarantee an engagement with artworks – people encountering public art are “undirected observers in the open urban field” (Zebracki 2013, 304) and do not necessarily react to it, in contrast to purposeful visits to cultural institutions like art museums or theaters. In addition, art in public space is often addressed towards the privileged and educated strata of the majority society, which is why reducing such barriers is a guiding principle of many contemporary projects. Alongside official and institutionally sanctioned art, informal, partly subversive art forms have arisen as well, for example, street art. Christian Höller has divided public art projects into so-called “*Störungsdienste*” [disruption services] and “*Entstörungsdienste*” [de-disruption services]:

[O]n the one hand, there is the disruption of authoritatively decreed, capitalist conditions (immigration laws, gainful employment, the rule of money); on the other, there is the charitable impulse to lend a hand to marginalized groups through artistic contributions, in short, to disrupt the functioning of the social wheel. (Höller 1995, 22; trans. CB and NG)

As “disruption,” art in public space is directed, for example, against neoliberal urban policy and the gentrification of neighborhoods. In this respect, public art can become “one of the most penetrating weapons” (Lossau and Stevens 2014, 4).

“Site-specificity” is a concept from art theory understood as “art for a particular place that is inseparably connected to it and thereby deals with it not only formally [. . .] but also in terms of content [. . .]” (Krystof 2002, 231; trans. CB and NG; see Kwon 1997). Such a conceptualization of spatial-artistic interdependence can also be applied to poetry in public spaces, which fulfills several or even all dimensions of the attribute “public” according to Cartiere. Attention must be given both to the artwork and to the way it stands out from the surrounding space, with the work itself highlights its own specificity. Like visual art, poetry in public space can also contribute to “place-making” (Lossau 2015) – a term used in urban research to denote the production of space by various actors such as urban planners and investors but also by grassroots initiatives and residents. Here one

could refer also to the notion of the “production of space” as theorized by Henri Lefebvre, in that artistic and poetic practices may change both the “perceived space” and the “inhabited” space of a “lived experience,” enabling other, perhaps unintended, uses of an area (cf. 1991 [1974], 34, 38–39).

Based on the materials of an encompassing study on *Public Poetry* (Benthien and Gestring 2023) and including a few further materials, the following two sections will present a broad spectrum of poetry as public art. Many projects were developed by individuals or institutions and not conceptualized as recurring events. Poetry as public art particularly aims at surprising and even provoking the audience into experiencing poetry in unexpected ways and sites – for instance in places one would expect to find advertisements. Furthermore, public poetry is often related to other art forms – visual art and performance art in particular – as well as to everyday practices and life. The following brief descriptions make the case for categorizing the spectrum of poetry as public art in two groups – poetry installations and performative poetry formats – the main criterium being the respective aesthetics. For a detailed discussion, aspects like the artistic concepts and intentions, the possible socio-political or cultural-political backgrounds, the specificities of the chosen site, the various actors and institutions involved, as well as the modes of reception, would, of course, also be significant.

The aesthetics of poetry installations

Wall poems are a classic format of public poetry, often realized by dedicated individuals whose motive is a combination of enthusiasm for poetry and educational ambitions. For wall poems as permanent, often large-scale inscriptions of publicly visible facades and walls, surfaces are chosen that would also be suitable for commercial or political advertising. The *muurgedichten* [Wall poems] in Leiden are a particularly ambitious long-term project. Scattered throughout the city, more than 120 poems can be read on the facades of residential and some commercial buildings. It is poetic world literature; most of the poems are by canonical poets from different centuries and countries. They are displayed on the walls in their original languages and scripts; on plaques mounted below the poems at eye level, Dutch and English translations can often be found. The Leiden wall poems are not only literary but also graphic works of art: Painter Jan Willem Bruins, who died in 2021, created for each poem its own aesthetic, with obvious echoes of the Bauhaus, the Dutch De Stijl group, and Russian Constructivism.

Based on the success of the Leiden poetry project, *muurgedichten* were increasingly painted in other Dutch cities, such as The Hague, Utrecht, and Rotterdam (see Van der Starre 2021). The wall poems in Charlotte, North Carolina, were also inspired by the Leiden wall poetry, using eleven English-language poems by regional authors. Again, each poem is designed individually in large-scale but the aesthetics are more diverse than in Leiden, which may also be due to the fact that different visual artists are involved. The recent poem “Black Lives Matter,” realized in graffiti style, also deals with a highly topical political subject. In the New York neighborhood of Fort Greene (Brooklyn), a third variant of wall poems was brought to life in 2021: Eight different haikus by Richard Wright can be found, each designed according to a unified concept. Designer Stephen Doyle chose a sans serif typeface with silver-gray letters that have – depending on the lighting conditions and the position of the viewer – varying degrees of reflection and alternating shades of color.

Poetry installations in rural landscapes: Although the majority of poetry as public art is featured in an urban context, there are also some projects created in the context of land art. One of the most spectacular permanent poetry installations in rural space is the *Stanza Stones Trail*, created in 2012, which runs through forty-seven miles of the Pennine region in Northern England. Similar to other poetry trails, it can be received only by hiking, and the experience is made difficult as the words are often hard to find on the scattered, secluded rocks. The *Stanza Stones* consist of verses from six site-specific poems by Simon Armitage, who grew up in this area, carved into various stones. Conceptually the engraved verses are related both to the “scars” of industrial exploitation of that area as well as the traces of human beings using it for recreation: Armitage and the letter carver Pip Hall had to adapt the verse to the stones’ rugged surface, and the resulting texts “might be touched with the hand. When rain fills up the engraved word ‘Rain,’ rain itself writes the poem” (Ghëerardyn 2023; see also Ghëerardyn 2021).

Self-reflexivity is constitutive also for the public artworks of conceptual Scottish artist Nathan Coley, who works both in cities and in the countryside. His main artistic materials are illuminated light bulbs and scaffoldings, out of which he builds large text sculptures with found lines or aphorisms in capital letters like “A PLACE BEYOND BELIEF” or “I DON’T HAVE ANOTHER LAND.” Coley’s project *Tentative Words Change Everything* (2022) consisted of large-scale text works installed at locations in and around the Lewes region of East Sussex, England. Sculptures faced out over the channel towards France, peered over historic towns, and sat in churchyards, vineyards, and atop a derelict modernist car park. The artist places identical sculptures in different landscapes (and cityscapes),

each creating a singular context: “The work responds to its site, and to the particularities of each encounter” (Le Feuvre 2014, 9–10).

Billboard poems, including poetry in public transport: Although billboards are mainly used commercially for advertising, they are also often a medium for political or religious propaganda or appropriated for artistic and literary expression. Here, the similarity of text types or articulatory modes can be deliberately played with, in order to unsettle the recipients or to express social critique. The Scottish artist Robert Montgomery is known for his poetic billboards: brief English texts written by himself, printed in plain white majuscule on a black background and pasted on billboards, mostly in Western metropolises. As they are neither marked with the artist’s name nor with that of an institution and contain indefinite personal pronouns, they are agitating “speech acts.” Montgomery is interested in “the lyrical potential of the city” and in “the idea of the city as a collective property, and thus a place of constant encounter and exchange” (Polla 2015, 19). His poetic critique is not directed against recent problems of urban life such as gentrification but rather responds to topics like capitalist consumption or the climate crisis, which he considers “the biggest question of our age” (Montgomery in Small 2013). Many poems therefore describe perceptions of nature that recall what is absent – a poetic concept of “urban greening.”

A second type of billboard poetry is *poetry in public transport*, which has found appeal in a number of initiatives around the world, particularly in subways in metropolitan areas. What is special about them is that poems are not placed in a static location but travel with the passengers through the underground. Correspondingly, the title *Poetry in Motion* of the New York City initiative alludes to movement as a special feature. Poems are selected jointly by the operating company MTA and the Poetry Society of America. The long-term project is serialized, with two poems published per quarter, almost exclusively contemporary American works. A new layout, initiated in 2012, corresponds to the MTA’s corporate design: framed poems in portrait format supplemented by illustrations of artworks, mosaics, and other wall designs that adorn New York subway stations, often shown only in sections or in graphic adaptations. In terms of content, *Poetry in Motion* can be interpreted as an element of image-building: Foregoing high-yield advertising space, it instead offers an opportunity for beauty and reflection through poetry in the inhospitable non-place of the subway – or, as has been remarked about a comparable project in Singapore, thus serves not least to improve the ambiance and pacify the users of mass transit, as a “*literary distraction*” (Gui 2019, 3). Today, poetry projects in public transport increasingly make use of digital screens, thus presenting poems in brief intervals between security advice and ads.

Xenon and LED light projections of poetry range between literary and conceptual art. The most prominent works are Jenny Holzer's open-air light installations, consisting of verse or short *Truisms* in capital white letters, projected onto facades, walls, and urban landmarks shown exclusively in the dark. They are created by xenon projection, a system capable of casting radiant and strong light over long distances, resulting in an ephemeral, elegiac flow of movement, running like film credits from bottom to top. One example is the projection, in the summer of 2019, onto the facade of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao – a famous, postmodern building by star architect Frank Gehry – on which the kinetic type disappeared again and again into the angles and shadowy surfaces, “enveloping” the organically sinuous, cubist-looking facade coated with shiny titanium plates before disappearing into the sky. The building was illuminated with poems in Basque, Spanish, French, and English; up to five were projected in parallel, which resulted in an overstraining of the viewers, an almost Babylonian confusion of languages.

The aesthetics of *TRANSIT – Vorübergehende Literatur* [Transit – passing literature], realized on Ebertplatz in Cologne in the spring of 2021, consist of texts by various authors in German plus a few in other languages, including many poems or poetic miniatures, presented on a 50-meter, high-quality LED treadmill with white script mounted on the parapet of the square above an underpass, which ran all day. Unlike their usual versed organization, poems were arranged in one long, horizontal line with slashes between verse and stanzas. The project's title plays on the ambivalent meaning of *vorübergehend* – which can be translated as both “temporary” and “walking past something” – referring to the constant movement of both the poems on the display and the passers-by underneath it. The presented poems dealt with (a) socio-political issues such as flight, immigration, and racism, (b) the pandemic situation (state control, isolation, fear), (c) the Ebertplatz or other urban spaces – the latter being site-specific poetry. The square has been considered dangerous in recent years, and the city authorities have reacted with video surveillance and plans to rebuild it. So far, however, only concepts for interim use have been implemented. Despite its partly provoking texts, the aesthetics of *TRANSIT* contributed both to “calming” the square and to a temporary place-making.

The aesthetics of performative poetry formats

Poetry as public art also includes performative formats and events. Such poetry projects attempt to create an intimate relationship between the performers (or performative objects) and the audience. They initiate performative processes, in

which attention is drawn to the materiality and copresent fleeting collectivity of performers and audiences (see Fischer-Lichte 2008).

As an example, *fire poems*, invented by Montgomery, are combustible short poetic texts lit in public display. In 2012 he realized the exhibition *Echoes of Voices in High Towers* with billboard poems at Tempelhofer Feld and in the streets of Berlin. For the opening, Montgomery effectively lit a fire poem on the field in an open-air performance against the night sky. Unlike a number of his other fire poems for major international museums and art events, including in the courtyard of the Louvre and at the Edinburgh Art Festival, here the letters hung like pieces of laundry on a fireproof line. Made of wood, a coating of flammable textile soaked in liquid accelerant caused them to catch fire quickly and then burn out over a long period of time. However, the obvious association – that in 1933 books were burned in public places in Berlin and other German cities – was not part of the artistic conception. The fire poem contained a single, enigmatic poetic phrase – “THE WAY THE PAGAN GODS ARE HALF REMEMBERED HERE” – invoking an eerie association, since there was indeed an affinity to the pagan gods of antiquity in National Socialism.

Another performative type of poetry as public art is shown in the *Bombardements de poemas* by the Chilean artist group Casagrande: a “bombardment” or “rain” of poems printed on bookmarks from flying helicopters or airplanes over central urban squares. In the first of those financially and logistically elaborate events, 400,000 bookmarks were dropped from six airplanes in March 2001 over La Moneda, the presidential palace in Santiago de Chile that was bombed in 1973 during the bloody military coup. The group wanted this to be understood as “a political gesture in opposition to Pinochet and opposed to any kind of dictatorship anywhere in the world” (as it read until recently on the Casagrande Website). The starting point is the idea that aerial bombardment attacks not only “the urban geography of a city but also its symbolic structure” (Casagrande 2011, 8; trans. CB and NG) and that this could be “healed” through poetry, as an “operation to resignify urban space destroyed in the past” (Bianchi 2020, 373). In documentary videos of the *Regen der Gedichte* [Poem rain] in August 2010 over Lustgarten in Berlin, for instance, people look joyfully and expectantly into the sky and catch some of the 400,000 German and Spanish contemporary poems sailing down. The fleetingness, singularity, and collectivity of the event play a major conceptual role, including “the experience of holding and reading messages individually” as well as “the multiple co-presence of bodies performing the running, the jumping to catch the passages, the holding and the reading of them” (Lagos Preller 2015, 160). The spatial movement of the participants and of the poems are interwoven and, like in Holzer, the vertical dimension of space is emphasized.

Smaller-scale performative practices of poetry in public spaces are less iconic and site-specific but still relevant. At least since the time of the Beat Generation, open-air poetry readings have been used as a creative format to present poems as public art – sometimes including or alluding to political protest (e.g., in the Gezi Park protests in Istanbul in 2013; → II.2 LIVE ORAL POETRY, II.8 POLITICAL AND ACTIVIST POETRY). An example is *#audiblepoetry*, a project by poet and performer Ulrike Almut Sandig, realized in spring 2019 in the Indian cities Delhi, Kolkata, and Pune: Sandig plus changing participants read poems of their choice in the noisy streets, amplified by a megaphone or a loudspeaker. Preceding the events, the poet had shared three messages: (a) “Words create reality”; (b) “A suitable text would be a poem/story that they think of would be strong enough to add something to the city that she lacks of”; (c) “short (5 mins max), audible, preferably in a language that is understood in the city (Hindi, English, . . .).” (Sandig in an email to the authors, March 4, 2019) Sandig conceptualized poetry in public space as a “gift” to the city, providing a quality of language that not only sounded different but was also understood and received by a certain group of residents, thus also thematizing the constitutive multilingualism of Indian society.

Informal poetry postings in the city: a tiny format, implemented by dedicated individuals or poetry collectives, involving slips of paper containing poems pinned at various urban locations. It also includes anonymous verse written on neglected walls, often in suburban zones, and, like graffiti, is conceptualized as “poetic assault,” popular particularly in Italy (see Gusella et al. 2020). This format is performative and ephemeral because the poetry notes are written over or torn off; it is also interactive because people add comments or, at times, “corrections.” In a Hamburg park during the Covid-19 pandemic, canonical poems copied on slips of paper appeared under the motto *Mal was Schönes* [Something beautiful for once] and were pinned to trees anonymously. The no-budget project can be interpreted as a gift to and comfort for the neighborhood. From 2001 to 2004, a group of young female authors in Leipzig put up small posters of their own experimental poems and other texts in public space. The project’s name *augen::post* [Eyes::post] emphasized the (visual) communication function. In some cases, the poems were annotated by readers, resulting in a communication between poets and the public. The most famous actor in this format, however, is the Viennese “Zettelpoet” [Note poet], for whom the posting of his own aphoristic texts on Post-Its and notes in subway stations, bus stops, and other sites has become a life’s work.

Closing remarks

The discussed formats of poetry as public art range from sheets pinned to lamp-posts or verses scrawled on walls or carved in stone, to posters with poems competing for attention with advertising messages, to permanent, large-scale wall poems on publicly visible facades, to the overwhelming aesthetics of light installations and fire poems. As diverse as the public poetry projects are, so are the ways in which the altered spaces can be perceived: A slip of paper on a tree can be mistaken for a housing request, while large-scale projections are hard to ignore. Public poetry differs from page poetry in the aesthetics of movement and mobility that are important to many projects – quite often poems are to be received “in motion.” Underlying the works in public space is a wide and disparate understanding of poetry, ranging from poems of the national or international literary canon to contemporary poetry, to simple short verse or aphorisms written by amateurs. AI-generated poetry is also used – for instance, in *TRANSIT*, Cologne – as well as prose texts that are often versified and exhibit poetic procedures. When these various types of poetry are presented in public space, they become part of urban (or rural) spatial production, insofar as the poems intervene both in the semantics and in the aesthetic shape of spaces, particularly if they are site-specific. As the diverse formats reveal, poetry as public art is situated between politics and beautification, between disruption and pacification, as well as between special events and everyday practices.

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