

Review Article

Strange alliance or a match that was meant to be? Interrelations between public art and the museum

Cher Krause Knight & Harriet F. Senie (eds.), *Museums and Public Art?*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018, hardback £40, pp. xxiv+304

J Pedro Lorente, *Public Art and Museums in Cultural Districts*, Abingdon, New York: Routledge, 2019, hardback £115, pp.ix+226

Traditionally, 'public art' and 'museum' have operated as oppositional terms: 'public art' usually being defined as art that is specifically presented and encountered *in public*, away from the aesthetic and curatorial umbrella of the art museum or the 'white cube' gallery. As a result, beyond an initial foray into this subject by American museologist Hilde Hein in the mid-2000s (*Public Art: Thinking Museums Differently* 2006), there has been a dearth of academic literature bridging these two spheres of art production. However, two recently published books, one emerging from the context of US public art practice, Cher Krause Knight and Harriet Senie's edited volume, *Museums and Public Art?* (2018), and the other embedded in a European art historical perspective, J. Pedro Lorente's monograph *Public Art and Museums in Cultural Districts* (2019), have now successfully broken this impasse.

Presented through a series of case studies, Knight and Senie's *Museums and Public Art?* explores a wide range of collaborations and 'arranged marriages' between museums and the public art sphere (14). Especially highlighted, in Senie's prologue to this volume, is the way this hybrid field of activity has arisen out of changing museological priorities, which in recent decades have shifted from the traditional preservation of object collections to a primary focus on audience and participation. Echoing earlier arguments made by Hein (2006) Senie gives special attention to public art's recent turn towards social and relational practice which, in its shared goals with museum education and community outreach agendas, has created a particularly fertile context for museum-public art collaboration.

The question of conceptual and spatial proximity between public art and the museum is a core concern within both the books under review. This is directly reflected in the structural schema for Knight and Senie's collected volume, with chapter contributions marshalled into three spatially-themed sections: 'In, At or On the Museum'; 'Elsewhere'; and 'In Between'. The range of essays presented in the first section serve to highlight both the field's potential and the institutional differences that need to be navigated in crossing or blending the boundaries between museum and public art practice. These differences are ably exposed in discussions by Emily Warner (on the relegation of the museum in relation to the expansion of muralist practice in New Deal era America, Chapter Two) and by Nicholas Hartigan's insightful examination of public art's potential collectability, focussing on the low museological status of public sculpture maquettes (Chapter Three). Stressing the opportunities for cross-boundary working, McCullough, Dewhurst and Du (Chapter One) offer an enthusiastic endorsement for public art (in its new socially-engaged paradigm) as a key methodology for subverting conventional museological power structures in favour of more polyvocal approaches. Turning to more material-based practice Rebecca Pollack's and Cher Krause Knight's chapter contributions provide contrasting examples of artworks commissioned at the architectural interface between the museum and public space: Rachel Whiteread's (2012) *Tree of Life* at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London (one of this volume's few UK-based references); and Chris Burden's temporary interventions *Ghost Ship* and *Twin Quasi-Legal Skyscrapers* at The New Museum, New York (presented

as part of Burden's major retrospective gallery exhibition in conjunction with the museum's Façade Sculpture Program, 2013-14).

In part two of Knight and Senie's book ('Elsewhere'), attention shifts to projects presented well beyond the physical space of the museum, but still contained within its institutional framing. While representing a diversity of practices, in terms of their scale and geographies, two important themes can be traced through the case studies examined. First, and perhaps running counter to the earlier argument forwarded around public art's subversive imperative, is the idea that museum involvement lends critical credibility to public art practice (e.g. as suggested in Leila Daws' account of her *Sky Maps* project in Chapter Seven). Second, as evidenced in temporary commission programmes such as Ljubljana's 'Museum in the Streets' (Cristian Nae, Chapter Nine) and The New Museum's 'Counter Culture' in New York (Andrew Wasserman, Chapter Ten), is the way in which public art activity has allowed museums to extend their reach into their surrounding urban sphere. As Nae convincingly points out, such projects are clearly aligned with the new image and identity of the museum 'as a socially responsible agent' (165). Interestingly, both examples presented here were initiated at transitional moments for these institutions, at a time when the physical museum was either closed for renovation or relocating to a new part of its home city. This latter was the context for 'Counter Culture', a project which Wasserman argues allowed the Museum to both stake its claim for legitimacy within its new neighbourhood (The Bowery) and, in line with wider cultural regeneration agendas, to assist the construction of a new arts focused audience and 'sense of place' for the area (182).

Perhaps as indicated in its title, the final section of this edited collection, 'In Between', proves the loosest of these three chapter groupings. Largely it rehearses and emphasizes themes explored in the previous two sections. Building on Knight's account of Chris Burden's work in New York, Kasia Ozga's chapter (Eleven) provides a useful survey of public art's links with monograph exhibition projects. Basing her analysis on 40 such projects staged between 1975 and 2015 this clearly constitutes a major genre of museum-public art crossover. As Ozga states, while these projects could be cynically framed merely as a form of advertising 'such simultaneity [is] a mutually beneficial means to expand the audiences and the discursive sites for artworks' (211). Expanding the discursive or dialogic 'site' of the museum is also a key theme of Meehan and Rooney's chapter on Boston's 'Vita Brevis' programme (established in 1997) which, like 'Counter Culture' in New York, self-consciously sought to form an affinity with the diverse cultures and histories of its surrounding cityscape.

While not denying the politics and problematics involved in such activities, taken together the fourteen invited chapters and Knight and Senie's own written contributions to this collection create a compelling argument for the value and benefits of museum-public art collaboration. In her epilogue to the book, curator Carole Anne Meehan sets out her 'Great Expectations' for the future of this hybrid sphere, calling in particular for a critical desegregation between museum and public art practice. In her view, the counter definitions of 'museum' or 'public art' are deeply unhelpful, serving only to feed 'assumptions of mediocrity about one area [public art] while expectations for excellence are reserved for the other [museum practice]' (274).

Although forming an extended and scholarly investigation in its own right, J. Pedro Lorente's (2019) monograph inserts itself very helpfully into an obvious gap left open in Knight and Senie's volume – namely the interface between the museum and permanent forms of public art, most specifically in his contribution: public sculpture. Through an extensive survey of examples drawn from many European countries, and sometimes further afield, Lorente's study demonstrates how, from the Enlightenment onwards, sculpture has commonly been used to connect museums with their surrounding cityscapes: marking the physical 'thresholds of museums [and] operating as artistic "appetizers" of the cultural feast to be served indoors' (4).

Framing his study as a blend of art history, museology and urban studies, Lorente begins his narrative with a discussion of the eighteenth century origins of 'cultural districts'. Lorente talks about these districts, then as now, as having a kind of 'special magnetism' (11). As he describes it, this magnetism was present in the imposing architecture of the early museum but also, importantly, in the external arrangements of sculpture that often spilled out from its galleries into surrounding porticos, terraces and promenades. Hinting at definitional divisions to come and presaging some of Meehan's commentary around differing valuations of artistic 'excellence', Lorente observes that while some of these early 'public artworks' were

considered and managed as a core part of the museum collection, others, perhaps set at more of a physical remove, were not always afforded this level of care and protection (40).

Chapter Three takes Lorente's discussion of the museum-public art relationship into the nineteenth century. Here he highlights a major shift in sculptural iconography, from familiar classical and allegorical themes, kings and heroes, to new depictions of 'cultural creators', i.e. artists, writers and composers (41). While such portraits had existed before inside many museum collections Lorente states that this is the first time that monuments to artists had been commissioned for the public realm. He notes how this new sculptural portraiture was sited in relation to a broader range of cultural infrastructure – sculptures of composers appearing alongside new concert halls and those celebrating writers set near public libraries, for example.

The second part of Lorente's monograph, 'Modern Arcadias', examines the further territorial expansion of these external sculpture ensembles, from the museum's architectural fringe into the wider green settings and sculpture gardens which he states were typical of many of the twentieth century's new Modern Art museums. As emphasized in the section's title, Lorente makes a strong effort to draw parallels here between these new Modernist assemblages and 'Arcadian' ideals. He writes that these green settings were specifically intended to function as contemplative zones, separated from the bustle of the urban environment, where visitors would be brought 'into cultural sublimation above and beyond [the] commoner pursuits' of the everyday world (72).

Part three, 'Museums take to the streets', abandons this utopia to return to the gritty urban fabric of the city. It is here that Lorente's work most clearly intersects with the timeline and arguments made in Knight and Senie's edited collection. However, where previously Lorente has adopted a similar spatial trajectory to their book (i.e. *from* the museum outwards into the cityscape), this latter part of his study articulates a different perspective – to consider how public art ensembles themselves connect to concepts and practices of musealization. One of the trends emphasized by Lorente, particularly in relation to recent Spanish practice, is the way in which many of these outdoor public art assemblies have originated from artist-led, rather than institutionally-led, activity. As he comments, although often resulting in quite substantial collections many such projects have never been formally recognized or designated as 'museums'. Lorente argues that this issue of official designation is 'not a trivial matter', recounting how some public realm artists and civic authorities have struggled with the value or applicability of the 'museum' term (145). This has meant that most public sculpture (outside of official 'sculpture parks') lies beyond the remit and protection of international cultural institutions such as ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites). As Lorente observes, such exclusion also means that public artworks are less subject to core (museological) curatorial practices such as artwork labelling and interpretation, sometimes to the detriment of the public art audience experience.

Connecting with some of the discussion presented in Knight and Senie's collection, Lorente is sceptical about public art's abilities as critical practice. He suggests that while there are some examples of success in this arena (citing Joseph Beuys' 1982 Documenta project in Kassel, *7,000 Oak Trees* as a milestone work) Lorente (echoing Ozga) is also clear that many contemporary museum-public sculpture projects, especially in their more monumental and figurative forms, are really more a type of 'cultural branding'. Lorente cites Jeff Koon's floral *Puppy*, outside the Bilbao Guggenheim, placed there as a popular and photogenic icon for the institution, as a prime example of this type of practice. Although sometimes cautious about museological efforts to reach out into the wider social space of the city, Lorente concludes with a strong call for a more inclusive interrelation, or 'heritology', between museums and the public realm, stating his firm belief that 'museums cannot be segregated from other cultural sites and amenities, including monuments and public art' (205).

Read together, Lorente's and Knight and Senie's books do excellent service in revealing the unwritten history of engagement between museums and public art, signalling perhaps towards a future collapse of differentiation between these two zones of practice. Knight and Senie's collection in particular, offers an arts interest readership a much-needed and lively primer on contemporary museum-public art collaborations, although for myself, one which is perhaps lacking in terms of its European coverage. Lorente's study takes a much longer art historical

view and has a more satisfyingly international reach than Knight and Senie's collection. The essential limitation of his book is in its singular focus on sculpture to the exclusion of other forms of permanent public art practice. The existence of this wider field is mentioned only in a brief deviation to discuss murals and 'street art' in Chapter Six. While narrow in its focus Lorente's text is, however, deeply researched and in its abundance of cases and visual examples is likely to provide a highly informative read for many art historians and visual art practitioners. It is also very relevant to scholars and researchers wanting to gain a more historical perspective on culture-led regeneration.

References:

Hein, H., (2006) *Public Art - Thinking Museums Differently*, Lanham, New York, Toronto, Oxford: Altamira Press.

Dr. Rebecca Farley

Research Associate, Newcastle University