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Invisible Culture

An Electronic Journal for Visual Culture

Introduction: Visual Publics, Visible Publics

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Our theoretical understanding of public is much changed since Jurgen Habermas first put forth his notion of the bourgeois public sphere in 1962.¹ While Habermas ideal of a democratic, dialogic community external to both the private sphere and the state is still valuable today, the more recent critical work of Bruce Robbins, Nancy Fraser, Rosalyn Deutsche, and Michael Warner (to name only a few)² point less to a definable, singular public sphere and more to an often-indistinct and fragmentary interplay of multiple publics and counterpublics. These new critical understandings of public raise questions about who is included and who is excluded in the formation of certain publics, and problematize overly simplistic binary distinctions between inside and outside, public and private. As such, it has become more difficult than ever to define a public (or publics) concretely, as either theoretical or practical cultural entities.

This issue of *Invisible Culture* is a modest attempt to explore some of the many issues raised by the growing field of public sphere theory. Taking a cue from Michael Warner, the articles presented here consider an understanding of publics as social, spatial, and ideological entities formed in discursive relation with a variety of cultural texts and practices, particularly, for the purposes of this issue, visual texts. In the essays that follow, publics are elaborated through discussions of art, mass media, notions of citizenship, history, and urban identity. The authors in this issue show how the concept of public participation can be both hegemonic and resistant (and sometimes a combination of the two). And by drawing attention to such thorny issues as the often-indistinct distinction between public and private, the interdependence of public practice and urban history or identity, the sometimes-fleeting agency of the public citizen, and the difficulties in addressing a particular public, the essays in this issue endeavor to bring to life, and into view, the fragmentary, problematic nature of defining the public sphere.

The first two articles in this issue present perspectives on the interdependence of a cultural text and the public it purports to address. The first of these, Jessica Robey's *Appetite for Destruction: Public Iconography and the Artificial Ruins of*

SITE, Inc., joins a body of established scholarship interpreting the relation of public to urban space through the aesthetics and reception of public artwork. In this case, Robey addresses the intersection of art and commerce in the postmodern architectural (de)constructions of public art collective, SITE, Inc. In an effort to challenge what they see as the cool, inaccessible austerity of modernist public art and architecture, SITE imbues functional vernacular architecture with whimsical humor, the drama of structural impossibility, and melancholic ruin and decay. Drawing on the writings of Robert Venturi, Georg Simmel, and James Wines (SITE's articulate front man), Robey raises intriguing questions about the how mass culture and high art might, and perhaps should, overlap within urban commercial space.

In *All Together Now! Publics and Participation in American Idol* Simon Cowell performs a similar investigation of the dialogue between public and cultural text, here, in a mass cultural context, by analyzing the the wildly popular reality television show, *American Idol*. As a show that is premised on the opportunity for public participation on multiple levels, *American Idol* affords Cowell an intriguing subject for the discussion of pleasure and active participation in television viewership. But Cowell also explores how the makers of this anyone can be a star, pop-music, talent TV show exert forms of exclusion and control over their public. As such, Cowell's nuanced reading suggests, the viewing and participating public of *American Idol* have more in common with Habermas' public sphere than might initially be apparent.

In Lisa Uddin's *Canine Citizenship and the Intimate Public Sphere*, we are asked to consider the boundaries of who or what may participate in the public sphere and why. In her consideration of animal citizenship in social, political, and cultural contexts, in particular the role of man's best friend in the discourse of good citizenship, Uddin evokes a public sphere that is inclusive, but regulatory. Using Lauren Berlant's conception of the intimate public sphere, Uddin draws parallels between the fetus-as-citizen and the canine citizen in order to illuminate ways in which public morality is used to control the private sphere. And in so doing she raises provocative questions about the meaning and motives behind animal rights and the privileged role of the "noble dog" in American society.

The issue concludes with two close readings of publics in particular urban contexts. The first of these, Sunil Manghani's *Picturing Berlin: Piecing Together a Public Sphere*, explores Berlin's struggle to form a coherent public sphere in the face of its fragmented and tumultuous history. Drawing from W.J.T. Mitchell a more broadly defined conception of image, Manghani suggests that the public sphere may best be formed and maintained through non-linguistic forms of public participation. And for all its fragmentariness and instability, Manghani's notion of a visually realized Berlin public sphere draws attention, not only to the fragmentary

nature of all public, but to the distinct advantages for individual agency in a public sphere that is established on multiple urban histories and identities.

Finally, Shannon Mattern offers a similar investigation of a public in dialogue with its urban surroundings. In her essay, *Plurality in Place: Activating Public Spheres and Public Spaces in Seattle*, Mattern offers perhaps the most practical, experiential notion of public advanced in this issue. Drawing from the social, political and economic issues affecting urban development in Seattle, Washington, Mattern pays close attention to the role of the collective and pluralistic citizenry in the design and use of city space. And in her assessment of past failures and successes, as well as her ideals for future development, Mattern seems to acknowledge the value of both Habermas' public sphere a concrete entity that expresses itself through debate over and presence in urban space and the more multiple and fragmentary publics of Habermas' critics. Mattern uses the work of Michel de Certeau to stress the inherent pluralism of cities in general and the dependence of urban space on the actions and reactions of its inhabitants to bring it to life. Ultimately, she argues, these academic notions of the formation and function of plural publics have much to contribute to the practical process of urban design.

1. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1962).
2. In addition to Habermas, see: Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes To Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997); Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992); Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996); John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1927); Nancy Fraser, *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989); Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1925); Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1972); Bruce Robbins, ed., *The Phantom Public Sphere* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); and Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002).

