

## Behind the Image, Beyond the Image

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# The Most Radical Exposure. Displaying Photography in Public Space

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**Abstract** Due to its intrinsically objectual nature and its extra-artistic, capitalistic, and coercive public uses, photography holds a highly problematic position in contemporary art practices in urban space. Nevertheless, the growing number of outdoor photographic exhibitions calls for a reconsideration of its critical paradigms. This paper, therefore, presents the main issues related to photographic displays in shared urban space, discussing two case studies – i.e., Steve McQueen’s *Year 3* project (London, 2019) and JR’s *La Ferita – The Wound* (Florence, 2021) – through the socially engaged art lenses of participation, duration, and the artists’ role towards the communities.

**Keywords** Photography in public space. Socially engaged art. Art in public space. Steve McQueen. JR. Participation. Situation. Engagement. Photographic display.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Art, Public, Space: Three Paradigms. – 3 Displaying Photography in Public Space and Its Discontents. – 4 Two Case Studies: Steve McQueen’s *Year 3* and JR’s *La Ferita – The Wound*. – 5 Conclusions.

## 1 Introduction

Photography has had a long history within shared urban space in its more than a hundred and eighty years long life. Due to its widely acknowledged ability to convey a more direct, immediately suggestive, and *codeless* message (Barthes 1961), the photographic medium has quickly replaced more traditional graphic representation techniques



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for many public purposes, ranging from advertising to information, passing through its controversial use in propaganda. In the field of artistic practices, on the other hand, the presence of photography in public space can be traced back to the last five or six decades, substantially coinciding with the progressive shift, during the 1960s, of a certain artistic production from the institutional framework of museums and galleries to external spaces. Nevertheless, both curatorial studies<sup>1</sup> and socially engaged art criticism tend to marginalise, if not completely neglect, the theoretical position of photography in urban space, despite its importance in contemporary artistic operations. Therefore, in this paper, I will begin by outlining the three most important paradigms of artistic practice in public space to highlight the changing relations between the terms *art*, *public*, and *space*. I will then describe the main problems that stand in the way of an appropriate contextualisation of the photographic medium in public exhibition contexts, thus attempting to reposition photography within the specific lexicon and themes of the current debate on art in public space. Subsequently, through the recent examples provided by director and visual artist Steve McQueen's project *Year 3* (London, 2019) and street artist JR's installation *La Ferita - The Wound* (Florence, 2021), I will analyse photography in public space not only from an objectual point of view but also from the perspective of its modes of production and reception, that is, literally, what stands behind and beyond the image.

## 2 Art, Public, Space: Three Paradigms

As separately documented by Suzanne Lacy (1995) and Miwon Kwon (2002) in their respective genealogies of American public art and site-specificity, the theoretical object identified as 'public space' has undergone and at the same time redefined a plurality of factors over the decades, such as political guidelines, social demands, public funding, and cultural changes. Moreover, as the meaning of 'public space' has changed, radically different artistic responses have been developed, which in turn coincide with distinct democratic visions.<sup>2</sup>

As in the early 1960s the "cannon-in-the-park" (Baca 1995, 131) model of public commissioning - i.e., the traditional notion of monument aimed at celebrating national history and its exclusively male,

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<sup>1</sup> In Alessandra Mauro's discussion of the "landmark exhibitions that defined the history of photography" (Mauro 2014), no attention is paid to the many public displays of the medium. For its part, Alexandra Moschovi's recent study (Moschovi 2020) on the exhibition identity of photography also focuses mainly on the history of its inclusion in contemporary art museum collections.

<sup>2</sup> For further discussion on the relationship between art in public space and democracy, see Deutsche 1996; Latour, Weibel 2005; Zuidervaart 2011; Evans 2019.

white, and wealthy protagonists – started its downward parabola, the paradigm that replaced it did not seem to pay particular attention to the large segments of civil society that had been ignored until then. The first attempt on American territory to replace the celebratory monument's obsolete artistic typology was inspired by the desire to bring the 'best' art of the time, coinciding, of course, with minimalist sculpture, to the widest possible audience. On an aesthetic level, there was no actual difference between the art forms that could be found inside and outside the museum-gallery system, except for the difference in scale. In their "at most incidental" (Kwon 2002, 63) relationship with the site, modernist sculptures remained essentially autonomous from the public space, whose only relevant aspects seemed to be those that would guarantee a better formal appreciation of the artistic object. Despite the claims to bring the excellence of the art world closer to the general public, the 'art in public places'<sup>3</sup> paradigm was based on a schizophrenic vision of its audience, which was imagined as generic, universal, and indivisible (thus disassociated from the different local realities), and yet was systematically set aside in favour of a small circle of contemporary art connoisseurs.

The problem of the (in)accessibility underlying this first model became so obvious that it was taken as a conceptual as well as a literal objective by a new generation of artists who, from the mid-1970s, initiated a paradigm based on the integration of the art object into the architecture of the city. The aesthetic qualities of the work were in this perspective secondary to its functional value, to the point of even representing an obstacle to its integration with the site. However, in relation to its audience, this second approach did not make any significant progress in its involvement. Above all, even in this case, the public retained rather blurred contours, which became even more problematic when the aim was to interpret its needs.

Alongside these developments, the rise of artists and collectives with a common interest in social and political themes (such as gender, ethnic and environmental issues), as well as a shared anti-objectual, activist and community-grounded approach, provided the basis for a third paradigm, defined by Suzanne Lacy as "new genre public art". In Lacy's own words:

Unlike much of what has heretofore been called public art, new genre public art – visual art that uses both traditional and nontraditional media to communicate and interact with a broad and diversified audience about issues directly relevant to their lives – is

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**3** This approach takes its name from the establishment in 1967 of the Art in Public Places Program by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), a US public funding agency coordinated by a group of art experts.

based on engagement. [...] new genre *public* artists draw on ideas from vanguard forms, but they add a developed sensibility about audience, social strategy, and effectiveness. (Lacy 1995, 19-20; italics in the original)

What made this third approach truly new was a reconsideration of the audience, no longer conceived as an abstract entity but recognised as “broad and diversified”. This change of perspective, underlined by the passage in the specific lexicon of the 1990s from ‘audience’ to ‘community’, stemmed on the one hand from the artist’s frequent belonging to the same social group for whose cause he or she was actively committed and, on the other, from the desire to “reach those for whom the art’s subject [was] a critical life issue” (Jacob 1995, 54). The consequences of this shift from the object-in-public-space to the process-with-the-community were manifold: first, the term ‘work’ was increasingly replaced by the term ‘project’. Secondly, the new genre of public art began to reject the need to materially create an artefact, with the focus of artists and curators moving to the participatory process of social transformation.<sup>4</sup> In the absence of an object to evaluate, the inadequacy of the traditional methodologies of art criticism opened the field to new aesthetic categories such as engagement, effectiveness, and responsibility.

### 3 Displaying Photography in Public Space and Its Discontents

The categories introduced by the last paradigm clearly pose obstacles to using the photographic medium in new public space practices. The first of these undoubtedly coincides with the performative participation typical of the more recent artistic direction, seen as a tool “to collapse the distinction between performer and audience, professional and amateur, production and reception” (Bishop 2006b, 10). Although British critic Claire Bishop (2006a) has extensively elucidated the sub-levels of such participation, exposing the social optimism, naivety, and risk of neoliberal co-optation behind some of these practices, collaborative performance has undeniably offered artists an opportunity to explicitly engage participants, share the authorial role and renounce the production of specific objects (if not collaterally).

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<sup>4</sup> Estella Conwill Májozo effectively expressed this recalibration in artistic objectives in the following words: “To search for the good and make it matter: this is the real challenge for the artist. Not simply to transform ideas or revelations into matter, but to make those revelations actually matter” (Conwill Májozo 1995, 88).

Linked to the preference for participatory dynamics is the duration of community-based interventions. As they are not reduced to creating an artefact, and frequently not even to a single event, these new participatory works are carried out over an extended period that may often cover days, months or even years. The impossibility of identifying a truly artistically decisive moment within projects focused on duration prevents the commercial art system's co-optation of such works and it creates a substantial distinction between participants (primary audience) and those who experience only part of the process (secondary audience).

In this drive to initiate anti-objectual, participatory and prolonged actions, socially engaged artists in public space reconnect with Guy Debord's theoretical elaboration, from which they draw a vision of modern capitalistic society as an organisation of spectacles and a consideration of the individual as an alienated spectator. Since for the Situationists even "the most personal and radical of gestures, and every conceivable aspect of life [was] reproduced as a commodity" (Plant 1992, 11), the unpredictable and workshop-like nature of their practices constituted a possibility for the re-humanisation of the subject. Similarly, for many artists engaged in the public sphere since the 1990s, the creation of situations has represented a privileged way of providing members of participating communities with a more active role than that typically associated with the art spectator, but also that reserved for them by unequal social conditions.<sup>5</sup>

When it comes to photography, all these categories become problematic: if a photograph is irretrievably an object, how can it be consistent with the expectations and needs described above? How can the production of a photograph be participatory, when it structurally implies an 'in front of' and a 'behind' the camera? Furthermore, how can the fixity and immutability of a photograph be combined with the duration of socially engaged processes? And, finally, where can photographic practice fit into the 'situation vs. spectacle' dichotomy, if in its public dimension it is commonly seen, because of the multiple non-artistic uses mentioned at the beginning, as a "means of mass manipulation and political domination [the result of which] is a society of spectacles and scopic regimes where citizens are transformed into both passive spectators and objects of surveillance" (Hariman, Lucaites 2016, 1)?<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Once again, Bishop has underlined how this "emphasis on process over product - or, perhaps more accurately, on process *as* product - is justified on the straightforward basis of inverting capitalism's predilection for the contrary" (Bishop 2012, 19; italics in the original).

<sup>6</sup> In the current non-artistic debate, photography's unprecedented and growing ubiquity seems to raise even greater concerns about the medium, especially in relation to the perceived loss of personal privacy due to the proliferation of digital cameras and the ease of online circulation; see Marsh, Miles, Palmer 2015.

Therefore, for photography and its practitioners, answering these questions is not just an aesthetic conundrum but a fundamental step in clarifying the ethical value of the relationships existing between the author, his/her work, and the communities. Critic Grant H. Kester's distinction between 'delegation' and 'representation', i.e., between the artist's participation in the community in which they act and an opposite representation from outside of it,<sup>7</sup> becomes all the more salient for photography because of the danger of a complete aestheticisation and spectacularisation of social demands by the artist, which would produce a further separation between the actors involved and an even greater passivity of the subjects portrayed. Although the undeniable objectivity and structural realism of the photographic image seem to shelter it from the criticism of "symbolic excess" (Kleinmichel 2019) – that is, of being too cryptic and therefore ineffective –, these same characteristics might condemn photography to an accusation of evangelising communities or, even worse, of instrumentalising others' causes for purely aesthetic purposes and absorbing them into the artist's agenda.

In the next paragraph, I will thus compare two recent examples of photographic exhibitions in public space to verify how they responded to the critical issues discussed so far.

#### **4 Two Case Studies: Steve McQueen's *Year 3* and JR's *La Ferita – The Wound*<sup>8</sup>**

In November 2019, images of hundreds of third-year classes occupied the public space of London, displayed in gigantic format on over six hundred billboards located in busy streets, bus stops and underground stations. At the same time, in Tate Britain's Duveen Galleries, the indoor exhibition of those same images – displayed in smaller sizes with identical frames and distances – revealed the scale of the *Year 3* project. This consisted of 3,128 pictures of 76,146 pupils from 1,504 London primary schools, taken the previous year by a team coordinated by director and visual artist Steve McQueen (1969). In Florence, on 19 March 2021, the French street artist JR (1983) opened *La Ferita – The Wound*, a gargantuan photographic collage twenty-eight metres high by thirty-three metres wide consisting of around eighty photographic prints on aluminium panels. Installed on the façade of

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<sup>7</sup> In this respect, Kester firmly opposes Pierre Bourdieu's interpretation of the relationship between the delegate and the community, according to which – from a political semiotics perspective – the latter does not pre-exist its formalisation by the former (Bourdieu 1994).

<sup>8</sup> In this paragraph I shall reprise and elaborate on some opinions I have expressed regarding JR's *La Ferita – The Wound* in Borselli 2021.

Palazzo Strozzi, the work ideally projected the passer-by from the Florentine streets into the Renaissance building, showing its interior through the anamorphosis of a fictitious cut in the walls.

From a socially engaged perspective, it is necessary to clarify the aims of the two works. The interest in *Year 3* was twofold, as it meant both to critique the current British educational system, with particular reference to the progressive financial cuts and the down-sizing of arts teaching in compulsory education,<sup>9</sup> and to document the multiculturalism of younger generations in London: a condition which becomes all the more evident, the more it is contradicted on a daily basis by the recent conservative, souverainist and isolationist policies of the UK government.<sup>10</sup> In a different context, JR's installation "propose[d] a direct and evocative reflection on the accessibility not only of Palazzo Strozzi but of all cultural venues in the age of the Covid-19".<sup>11</sup> In the words of Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi's director and curator of the project Arturo Galansino, "the decision to create a work visible to everyone on the façade of Palazzo Strozzi [became] an invitation to rediscover a direct relationship with art and a call for new forms of sharing and participation".<sup>12</sup>

This reference to the participatory dimension allows me to delve into the choices made by the two artists for their projects. In terms of involving communities, when McQueen stated that "without their participation, this could never happen"<sup>13</sup> he was obviously referring not only to the fundamental collaboration of the many schoolchildren who contributed to the project, but also and above all to the long series of actions undertaken, thanks to the partnership with A New Direction, to guarantee the quality, consensuality and safety of the relations between all the actors involved.<sup>14</sup> Through these tools, aimed at children, parents, teachers, and even Steve McQueen's team of collaborators, the operation was concerned with providing schools with

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**9** For a proper framing of the problem, see the 2018 annual report - coincident with *Year 3*'s conception - published by Cultural Learning Alliance, a network of British organisations defending the right to access to art and culture for children from all social backgrounds: <http://culturalllearningalliance.org.uk/arts-in-englands-schools-the-current-picture/>.

**10** For a more in-depth analysis of the relationship between Steve McQueen's work and the multiculturalism that underlies contemporary Britishness, see Ring Petersen 2020.

**11** Press release, 19 March 2021, unnumbered pages.

**12** Press release, 19 March 2021, unnumbered pages.

**13** *Steve McQueen in conversation with James Lingwood*, 4 May 2020, 00:12'43", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O9eRrf30TgQ&t=766s>.

**14** A detailed list of all the measures arranged by A New Direction in collaboration with Steve McQueen and Tate Britain to ensure the educational value and relevance of the project, as well as the well-being of the children involved and a support for the team of photographers who worked on the images can be found online at: [www.anewdirection.org.uk/steve-mcqueen-year-3](http://www.anewdirection.org.uk/steve-mcqueen-year-3).

everything they needed to support education in the arts and culture instead of the government's economic policies. On JR's side, however, participation seemed to be interpreted in a profoundly different way. Despite the proclamations, the communities that could have been involved in the realisation of the project – Florentine citizens? art workers? cultural associations and institutions? – have never been directly involved, in favour of a purely digital audience engagement, analysed in terms of sharing images of the installation on social networks. As a result, participation as a political subversion of the an-aesthetisation given by capitalistic spectacle came dangerously close to the promotional logic of user engagement typical of marketing or cultural project management.

The duration of the operations can, in turn, say something interesting about the artists' intentions. In *Year 3*, three different time frames were involved: the days of the public display on billboards; the months of the exhibition in Tate Britain; and, above all, the year that elapsed from the conception of the project to the end of its actual making. This complex temporality allowed the project to de-centre the importance of the material photographic objects and focus on a socially engaged perspective, also on the whole educational process designed for schools. Due to the absence of community involvement at the stage of its production modes, the temporality of *La Ferita – The Wound*, on the other hand, appeared much more traditional. Indeed, the decision to move the work's reception almost entirely to social media (although this should be assessed in the overall context of the global pandemics) thinned the sense of the main duration even more, consistently with the rapid and hypertrophic consumption of online images. Ironically, the opening of a new 'wound' on the façade of Palazzo Farnese in Rome on 20 July 2021, before the Florentine exhibit was even closed, accelerated the process of disaffection with the project, underlining the lack of relevance in architectural, contextual and community terms, of the public space for which it had been conceived. Therefore, on an aesthetic level, *La Ferita – The Wound* reaffirmed the centrality of its objectual nature, re-connecting to the 'art in public places' paradigm rather than to community-based practices.

## 5 Conclusions

The different approaches to participation, duration and objectuality of the two operations ultimately imply a different ethical vision by the artists of their own role and of their action in public space. Nevertheless, McQueen and JR shared a common intention to give visibility to the causes at the heart of their work. In the French street artist's installation, this aim was pursued on both a literal and an op-



erational level. In the wake of Baroque trompe-l'œils and ruinism, the wound on the façade of Palazzo Strozzi created the illusion of peeking into the building, although the photographic collage showed an almost non-existent interior. However, this highly dramatic and scenic effect was merely the premise for a different 'visibility': the one gained through the unstoppable online dissemination of images of the work. In this sense, despite the promotional attempt to endow the installation with a site-specificity that it clearly did not possess, *La Ferita - The Wound* bore little resemblance to socially engaged works. Rather, it appeared to act exactly like a 'filter' - typical of the many social networks currently in use - that could be applied at will to the context that required it, one place after another.<sup>15</sup>

For Steve McQueen, the visibility of the cause he supported did not come through its spectacularisation but simply through an attempt to redistribute public attention to a social group consisting of the 7- or 8-year-old children of the city of London, to whom it is normally precluded.<sup>16</sup> Consistently, the author's role in relation to the community was not based on a relationship of distance but one of belonging. As a London artist descending from a family of immigrants, McQueen had the authority to denounce the systemic inadequacies that did not guarantee cultural education access to children of all ethnicities and social classes, placing himself in the position of the delegate of the community and not that of its representative from the outside. With his project, McQueen did not intend to seek for himself as an artist a role of evangelising benefactor, but rather to invoke, agitate and ultimately confront the political class that was supposed to solve the structural problems to which *Year 3*, for its part, offered visibility.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, JR's peripatetic and nomadic approach could only constrain his installation within the limits of 'works-that-talk-about' certain social issues without allowing him to truly participate in the communities for which these issues were crucial. Because of the physical and social distance existing between JR's *La Ferita - The Wound* and the communities, the work's "invitation to re-

<sup>15</sup> The logic of the social network filter is not new for JR, who has already tested it for his long-running project *Inside Out*; in this regard, see Ferdman 2012; Orpana 2014.

<sup>16</sup> To further counter the temptation to aestheticise the subject, all classes in *Year 3* were portrayed through an identical framing, corresponding on the one hand to the non-artistic tradition of the school yearbook and, on the other, to the legacy of August Sander's archival photographic style. This stylistic device is also consistent with the sense of "phenomenological estrangement" (Demos 2009, 10) and the lack of contextual information supplements that underlie many of McQueen's earlier works.

<sup>17</sup> In this view of the artist as cultural agitator, I do not draw on Claire Bishop's widely quoted and discussed "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics" (2004), but rather on the idea of "conflictual aesthetics" elaborated by philosopher Oliver Marchart (2019), according to which artists may use both aesthetic and activist means to respond to or contribute to social justice movements.

discover a direct relationship with art”, openly addressed to the citizens, implicitly entrusted those same citizens with the responsibility of imagining a future in which cultural sites could be open again.<sup>18</sup> By removing the main interlocutor from the debate, i.e., the institutional power (the State or, for the sake of greater proximity, at least the City of Florence or the regional government), the street artist thus deprived communities of the possibility of a true discussion - which would inevitably have led to a questioning, even accusatory - about the structural reasons for the persistent closure of cultural sites in over a year of pandemic crisis.<sup>19</sup>

In conclusion, both Steve McQueen’s *Year 3* project and JR’s *La Ferita - The Wound* based their aesthetic meaning (and, in the case of the British director’s work, also its ethical effectiveness) on a common intention of ‘creating visibility’. In doing so, they found a fundamental and not accidental ally in the photographic medium, which has always been theoretically associated with making things visible. In the artistic practice of photography, the technical principle of exposing an object to light to crystallise it into an image acquires a theoretical value thanks to the medium’s ability to *ex-pose*, that is, decontextualise, defunctionalise and resemantise an object.<sup>20</sup> This possibility of redefining, through the image, the field of the visible is enriched with a further level (a political, ethical, socially engaged and conflictual one) in the act of displaying photography in public space, which I intend to refer to as ‘the most radical exposure’: a practice that constantly runs the risk of being used in ways similar to images from the commercial sphere or propaganda, but that can offer the maximum visibility - and, therefore, the greatest possible transformative capacity - to projects that rely on it.

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**18** JR made the following comments on his Instagram profile the day before the opening of the installation: “They say the museums are closed. But it’s up to us to open them. [...] These last few months, we have been deprived from the possibility to be together ... but we still have the freedom to dream, to create, to envision the future. Maybe, it’s not much, but we have that” (JR, 18 March 2021, [http://www.instagram.com/p/CMk9ypwMoo\\_](http://www.instagram.com/p/CMk9ypwMoo_/)).

**19** Although Michael LeVan has described JR’s operations between 2004 and 2012 as a culture-jamming strategy based on “a confrontation with political complacency” (LeVan 2017, 201), the more recent modes of working with official permission and without prior listening to the communities make it at least problematic to assume *a priori* that the street artist’s images represent an effective agent of social change.

**20** “Dans un premier temps, la Photographie, pour surprendre, photographie le notable; mais bientôt, par un renversement connu, elle décrète notable ce qu’elle photographie” (Barthes 1980, 60).

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