

Is the desire for invisibility and absence in the visual arts an expression of “Zeitgeist”?

(niemieckie wyrażenie oznaczające „ducha dziejów” lub „ducha epoki” spirit of the age or spirit of the time)

Ralf Sander , Reader (associate professor)
University of Ulster, Belfast School of Art
Belfast, UK
BT15 1ED r.sander@ulster.ac.uk

www.ralfsander.info

This paper aims to enhance the understanding of current tendencies and strategies of disappearance within visual arts. It is the outcome of my strategies and observations about invisible art.

“The snowman is the ideal sculpture for the public exterior space: he’s not in the way, everyone knows him, he melts – and then he’s gone.” Kasper König¹

I plead guilty; I am authentically exhausted with and distanced towards fame and recognition despite being a successful player in the world of high-budget commissions and festivals of art in public space.

I have participated in hundreds of competitions and installed internationally more than 25 public sculptures, among them monumental stainless steel sculptures such as “Mirage” for Busan and “Connected One” the flagship sculpture for the 2018 Winter Olympics in South Korea. My most satisfactory works are literarily and sometimes deliberately invisible.

“Due to its cost and visibility, public art can be tough sell to, well, the public.” Henry Neuendorfer.

The production and introduction of artworks into the public domain started to be regulated and organized by national programs in the 1930s. Although state-sponsored institutions—such as the US Federal Art Project, the USSR’s Ministry of Culture, and the Chinese Communist Party’s art-related efforts—primarily pursued propaganda goals, this laid the foundation for public art programs worldwide.²

According to Maggie Bolt, director of Public Art South West (PASW), successful spaces do not have any obvious public art — they just work well. She is a fan of Richard Wilson's *Turning the Place Over*.

¹ Art critic and curator Florian Waldvogel in an interview with Kasper König about his experiences in ‘Skulptur Projekte Münster’, which König has organized from 1977 to 2007
source: <https://www.onlineopen.org/the-snowman> January 1, 2007

² <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/art-demystified-public-art-672092>

Turning the Place Over is highly visible in media and reality and obviously public art. I have to disagree with Maggie Bolt. The work is too often quoted by curators and writers without mentioning the father of this idea: Gordon Matta Clark.

Gordon Matta-Clark's anti-establishment suspicion of the worlds of art and architecture, illustrated by his involvement in the Anarchitecture Group, led to some of the most innovative works of Conceptual art of the 20th century.³

Richard Wilson's established and very famous sculpture *Turning the Place Over*, seems compared with "*Circus or The Caribbean Orange*" or "*Office Baroque*" 1978 by Gordon Matta Clark like a commercialization of his idea; an established and institutionalized concept supported by tourist administrations, marketing specialists and curators and the art critique. Mr Wilson is one of Britain's best known sculptors.⁴

Another example would be Michael Sailstorfer's work, *Gold Treasure Hunt* for the Folkestone Triennial 2014. He was hiding gold-bars in the sand of the beach at Folkstone Harbor. Visitors to the beach were invited to dig for gold, or to watch the **hunt** unfold. Successful treasure-hunters are entitled to keep their gold. This work is perfectly visible through PR and quoted as successful contemporary art intervention and a good example for community art. Born in 1979, Michael Sailstorfer lives and works in Berlin.

Another Berlin based artist however, Uwe Jonas seem nearly invisible in international media for his artwork, *Schatzsuche* (German for *Treasure Hunt*), in the project Areale Neukölln, 2001, Jonas was hiding 2000 DM (German Mark) in a cast concrete block of 2 x 2 x 2m. Citizens were invited to search for the treasure. As a result, treasure hunters shaped his block. Again, the less powerful promoted artist is invisible despite the fact that he developed the concept thirteen years earlier.

Joseph Beuys, for instance, spoke of 'aesthetic environmental pollution' according to Kasper König as he was invited for the first Sculpture Projects Münster, launched in 1977. Finally he decided to participate anyway with the very visible work 'Unschlitt/Tallow' 1977.

Over a period of time I had the desire to make invisible artworks, believing that this was the result of my encounter with Asian Art in South Korea, where I lived and worked for four years. But I observe that the concept of disappearance and the power of absence seems to gain more and more importance in contemporary art.

"Today the word image has become so inflated that its sense is extended to cover all things; that is, all things can be now designated as images, and yet precisely as a result of this extension they are effaced as things themselves in distinction from images. Even though, in the field of social practice and its theoretical discourse, this self-disfiguring inflation is inextricably linked to modern technology, mass communication, and the thoroughgoing reorganization of human life and society brought about through them, the inflation of image has its motivation, its theoretical

³ <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/gordon-matta-clark-conical-intersect>

⁴ <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/art-demystified-public-art-672092>

prefiguration in the history of philosophy.”⁵ It needs no further explanation, that the enormous amounts of images that surround us are used to manipulate. The use of fake images and AI generated news is evident and disturbing.

No surprise that artists start to develop strategies of invisibility.
Why should I add as to the inflation of ‘aesthetic environmental pollution’?

Hellmut Wohl, states that modern monuments fail to achieve transcendence; Monuments have ceased to engage our attention and have become, as it were, "invisible". And he observes that the problem is illuminated by fictive monuments in art.⁶

Long before Robert Musil declared that “there is nothing in this world as invisible as a monument,”⁷ many viewers stated that public monuments and images are of little value in comparison to living memory.

My project ***Shadows of the past***, investigates the impact of missing, absent or removed monuments and their presence in collective memory. The concept is to reconstruct the shadow of a removed or destroyed monument, oftentimes removed because of a change in political powers. I applied them to the ground with ephemeral materials that the shadow itself also disappears after some time. I used a water and gel paint to recreate the shadows.⁸

The Invisible Monument

In Bloomington, Indiana, USA, I made literally an invisible artwork. The object is completely absent. There is only a description plaque. I tested impact and believability of information in public realm within this artistic strategy. It visualizes through the viewer’s imagination. By twisting common assumptions or repeated habits of the everyday, the work attempts to disturb how things are supposed to be and how we are expected to live and communicate.⁹

Entanglement

I presented a series of images and prints, closed in dark boxes/suitcases. Once the images are exposed to light they disappear. They are portraits, secret portraits, people of public interest. The installation is comparable with the "Schroedinger’s Cat" thought experiment 1935. The quantum physicist argues, that the existence of quantum superposition in the microscopic world imply that they must also exist in the macroscopic world.

Schrödinger's cat lives and dies at once. The experiment brings together two quantum properties, in that the "cat" is simultaneously "alive and dead" (in a

⁵ Force of Imagination: The Sense of the Elemental by John Sallis Indiana University Press, 22 Sep 2000,pg. 80

⁶ W. Reinink and J. Stumpel (Eds.), Memory & Oblivion 925-928.
© 1999 Kluwer Academic Publishers.

⁷ Robert Musil, “Monuments,” in *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author*, trans. Peter Wortsman (Hygiene, Colorado: Eridanos Press, 1987), 61

⁸ <http://uir.ulster.ac.uk/30305/>

⁹ <http://uir.ulster.ac.uk/33014/>

superposition of states). An intervention however will influence the status and kill the cat. In *Entanglement*, it will destroy the image.¹⁰

Emptiness and absence

A solid piece of sculpture occupies space. In this case I made the opposite. I investigated possibilities of shaping the empty space. The target was to make a nearly invisible monument. The sculptures consist of large pillars and I am modelling the empty space in between. Seen from a particular position the image becomes visible but it is the empty space. Although the object is clearly figurative, it refers to the location in that the figure is actually defined by what's behind it. The absence is highlighted. These sculptures occupy an area somewhere between visual reality and imaginative experiences.¹¹

My conclusion is that permanent visibility and surveillance are the unrequested effects of the attention society and attention economy. Fame and visibility is a product, but of strong impact in art theory and curatorship.

No wonder that artists in the age of mechanical reproduction and inflation of images are searching for stronger strategies.

¹⁰<http://uir.ulster.ac.uk/33015/>

¹¹ <http://uir.ulster.ac.uk/31560/> <http://uir.ulster.ac.uk/33203/>