

THE END OF ARROGANCE, THE ADVENT OF PERSUASION

Public Art in a Multicultural Society

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Abstract: In Western societies, the boundaries of the freedom of expression had traditionally been expanding, while the boundaries of religion and 'good morals' had been receding. Since the last decade however, this expansion has slowed down, come to a halt, and ultimately reversed. In Europe, anxiety over the expression of protest through violent means has steadily caused governments to abandon the traditional, seemingly limitless adherence to freedom of expression. Political fear over controversy has come to dominate the climate of commissioning public art. In a polarized world, the debate on what is tolerable has taken on an acute urgency. The art world itself no longer has an answer. After a half-century of autonomy, it has succeeded in demolishing its own authority by ridiculing every aspect of external criticism. The only solution now will be a new form of dialogue with all stakeholders involved.

Keywords: censorship, counterculture, freedom of speech, Islam, modern art, multicultural societies, protest, public art, social realist art

After a decade or so of increasingly intensifying debates on controversial modern art, a decade that saw the removal or destruction of hated public art and a life-threatening *fatwa*, the physical violence against people and property has begun. In the early twenty-first century, Europe is the center stage for outbreaks of politically motivated violence against the material symbols of 'the enemy'—against writer-politicians, writer-artists, cartoonists, producers, and publishers.

Acts of violence have included the burning of 'colonial cars' in 2005 in the French *banlieus*, the ghettos where ethnic minorities live; the assassination of a controversial political candidate, Pim Fortuyn, in the Netherlands in May 2002



by a radical animal rights activist because he was “not against wearing fur” and was seen as a “danger to society in general”; and the murder of the Dutch writer and film director Theo van Gogh (a descendant of Vincent van Gogh) in November 2004 in an act of ritual slaughter on an Amsterdam pavement in retaliation for the ‘anti-Islam’ movie he had made. In the backlash of the van Gogh murder, a dozen schools, mosques, and churches were torched. Less than a year later, in September 2005, the ‘cartoon war’ started with a series of cartoons about the prophet Muhammad in a Danish newspaper, including one that portrayed Muhammad with a bomb for his headgear. A half-year later, the Danish consulate in Beirut was burned, and the Danish and Norwegian embassies in Damascus were set on fire.

All of these acts of violence against the ‘symbols of oppression’, the distributors of blasphemy, and the proponents of ‘hate speech’ have been caused by tensions within multicultural societies, which most European countries only in recent decades have turned into. Furthermore, all of these incidents have a relation to ‘the arts’. They were either ‘symbolic’ acts, such as burning cars that represented the hated native French, or a direct reaction to the artistic publications of a writer, a filmmaker, and several cartoonists. Subsequently, when governments attempted to calm down the public and soothe public opinion at home and abroad, ‘art’ suffered once again. In November 2004, the mayor of Rotterdam, amidst the violent turmoil of van Gogh’s murder, ordered the immediate destruction of a piece of public art next to a mosque. The mural, which featured white doves and the words “Thou shalt not kill,” came under fire when Muslim citizens protested that they were unjustly associated with the murder because the artist had added “2 November 2004” (the date of van Gogh’s death) to it. In February 2006, London condemned the publication of the Muhammad cartoons as “insensitive,” while Washington declared that it was “unacceptable” to incite religious hatred by publishing such pictures (*Economist*, 9 February 2006). Whereas in 1989, when the British writer Salman Rushdie published his *Satanic Verses* and the Iranian ayatollahs issued a *fatwa* to kill the author for his fictional, artistic insults of Islam and Muhammad, the reaction of London, and the rest of the West, was “We stand by our man, and his art” (Gonzalez 2005).

What is left of the adherence to ‘freedom of expression’? The present disarray on the value or necessity of freedoms of speech and expression to Western democracy is fueled by ethnic and religious tensions between the old Christian majorities (or those with Christian roots) and the new Islamic minorities. The September 2001 attacks in the name of Islam on the ‘heart of the West’ and the subsequent ‘war on terror’, followed by the terrorist bombings in Madrid (2004) and London (2005), have been called the proof that Samuel P. Huntington (1993, 1996) was right in predicting 10 years earlier a ‘clash of civilizations’.

In analyzing the fate of public art in multicultural societies, we will see that the present disarray the West has fallen into about the meaning of ‘freedom of expression’ has various origins: firstly, the crisis in modern art itself; secondly, the ongoing democratization of politics; and, finally, the mediatization of all public acts. The answer to the question ‘Who decides what is tolerable?’ will

be that in the end it is not the law, not the artist, not the art elites, not the authorities, but rather the general public or ‘public opinion’ that decides the fate of publicly exhibited art. To put it another way, the cultural climate in a country is the real judge. One particular question that arises is how tolerance toward controversial art can be promoted in today’s tense political climate. The answer will be that the fate of public art depends on the ‘art of persuasion’. It seems that, as all forms of arrogance sooner or later are bound to be punished, the era of the ‘arrogance of public art’ has come to an end.

The Ideology of Abstract Art

Changes in social, political, and religious beliefs have, throughout history, always resulted in parallel changes in the production of public art, as Dale Lanzzone¹ has described in “The Public Voice,” a short and elegant essay on public art in the US: “The ‘allowed’ and ‘profited’ meanings that are directly or indirectly expressed through a public work of art form a complex composition of ideas incorporating dreams, ambitions, myths, and fears—the many nuances of the objective and subjective self as a public entity. Works of art are necessarily encoded with the intelligence, vision, and resonating will of the dominant influences of their time.”

These words on the history of public art in the US generally apply to Europe, as for any country, although Europe has, of course, a different history and especially a more traumatic twentieth century, with World War I and II as a double watershed that has resonated in the art world. For both continents, the same general historical sketch applies. In the era of bourgeois nationalism, from the mid-nineteenth century up to World War II, governments vehemently promoted art in public places. As Lanzzone (2000: 3) explained the case in the US: “Fuelled by the resonance of commonly understood figurative sculptural narratives, works of art created during this time continue to attract support and interest from the general public to this day and are often looked upon by public decision makers as the standard for greatness in American public art. Public works of art of this period idealized and affirmed the officially supported social, economic, and political doctrines of the time, thereby gaining broad-based public acceptance and support.” For Europe, however, this was true to a lesser extent.

In Europe, artistic developments progressed in a more diverse manner than in the United States, as Europe is more diverse. And in the world of the arts, Europe was in a perpetual state of ‘civil war’, much like those wars being fought in the streets and on the battlefields. There was classical, neo-classical, and naturalist public art. There was avant-gardist public art and social realist art in the Communist Soviet Union and in Nazi Germany, both denouncing the ‘decadent bourgeois art’ of the liberal West—“*entartete Kunst*” (degenerate art), as Hitler called it (Barron 1991).

These ongoing ‘cultural wars’ in Europe ended in 1945 when the real wars ended, and like the real ones, the results were devastating. Germany was left a vacuum, as was Italy to a lesser degree. In despair, but at the same time

purposefully and willfully, Western Europe embraced all things that promised a break from its disastrous past. While in the US, ‘newness’ and ‘modernity’ formed the holy set of cultural values that legitimized the consumption-production cycle, believed to be necessary to sustain rapid economic growth and technological development. Concurrently, for the arts it meant that “the previous traditions and imperatives for public art that communicated social purposes and values were eschewed in favor of independent, forward-thinking expressions of bold, personal visions” (Lanzone 2000: 4).

In the United States, the urge for permanent artistic renewal may have been part of the triumph of capitalism and what the American economist Joseph Schumpeter (1942) once called its essence—“creative destruction.” In Western Europe, the official attitude toward art was predominantly formed by the negative: everything was allowed and promoted as long as it did not resemble social realist art, the propaganda tool of defeated Nazi Germany and that of the West’s powerful new enemy, Communist Soviet Union. Figurative representation and narrative idealism were de facto banned from public life (except for war memorials). In the Netherlands in the 1970s, some citizens founded an association for figurative art in protest of the “state ideology of abstract art.”

The belief in many Western countries that free and modern art should be abstract instead of figurative caused a great “uncertainty of taste,” but nobody wanted to be depicted as a “conservative.” Consequently, this uncertainty was never expressed clearly and artists were given more or less *carte blanche*. It is not hard to imagine some of the reactions of the judging state commissioners when confronted with incomprehensible works of art. Former politicians and decision makers later admitted that in some cases all they were able to utter was “how interesting” or “most peculiar,” while in reality being either disgusted or totally clueless (Beunders 1998: 184). Since the late 1950s, in fact, artists could unboundedly do what they liked. They became both icons and iconoclasts and were worshipped as heroic, courageous, and visionary creators of “the world to come,” in which everything would be better and freer.

During the Cold War, freedom and democracy were the key words in the West, with the emphasis on the first word in order to contrast the ‘better’ Western world against the category of ‘people’s democracy’ that existed in the East. While in the US the ‘Red Scare’ in the early 1950s led to dramatic forms of restrictions on the arts and self-censorship, Western Europe—under its own or the American nuclear umbrella—was able to celebrate freedom even more fully. Court cases for public acts of blasphemy, for insulting royalty or a friendly nation, or for corrupting morals seldom resulted in imposing a fine or jailing the offenders.

The Ideology of Human Rights

In the West, freedom and human rights were inseparable. Looking back from the early twenty-first century, it is easy to see how unbalanced the titles of the two grand official declarations on the matter were. The first was the Universal

Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted by the United Nations in 1948, at a time when the UN was dominated by Western powers. The second was the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, also known as the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), which was adopted under the auspices of the Council of Europe in 1950. Established in 1949, the Council of Europe was founded by 10 states: Belgium, Denmark, France, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. The Convention of 1950 was the first international legal instrument safeguarding human rights.

For the following 50 years, both Western governments and the Western public read and reiterated only the words “human rights,” or only one word, “rights.” “Rights” were the main issue, whereas the other key words of both documents, “duties and responsibilities,” were not emphasized as much. Both documents were inspired by Christian beliefs and are partly a secular rephrasing of biblical commands. Of course, the UDHR article regarded as the most important was and still is: “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers.” However, in the UDHR this statement only materializes in Article 19; thus, it is preceded by no less than 18 other rights. Take Article 1: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.” This proclaimed equality of everyone in “dignity and rights” is followed by a command to act “in a spirit of brotherhood.” In Article 29, the UDHR commands once again: “Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible.”

Freedom of the arts is not included at all in the UDHR. Only once, in Article 27, is there a reference to the word ‘art’: “Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancements and its benefits.” While Article 27 makes note of art, it is merely focusing on the public—participating, enjoying, and sharing—not on the creating artist.

In the ECHR, the freedom of expression is even more restricted. Ironically, this restriction of the freedom of expression is formulated in the very same article (Article 10.1) that proclaims it: “Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers. This article shall not prevent States from requiring the licensing of broadcasting, television or cinema enterprises.” The second part of Article 10.1 contains an even longer list of limitations of this freedom: “The exercise of these freedoms, since it carries with it duties and responsibilities, may be subject to such formalities, conditions, restrictions or penalties as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society, in the interests of national security, territorial integrity or public safety, for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of health or morals, for the protection of the reputation or rights

of others, for preventing the disclosure of information received in confidence, or for maintaining the authority and impartiality of the judiciary.”

It is even worse. In some national constitutions in Europe, the subject of art is not mentioned at all (Peaslee 1968). In other constitutions, there might be a paragraph merely mentioning that “the state should promote art.” In other words, there is very little concern given to the arts as a basic right of freedom in European constitutional legislature. The fact that human or constitutional rights might clash with each other and with all the prescribed duties to the community was, of course, well known to domestic authorities and judges, who in court cases had to decide which of the constitutional or international rights prevailed. However, during the Cold War, both governments and public opinion kept advocating the importance and prevalence of the human right of freedom above all other interests.

Toward the end of the millennium, however, things began to change rapidly. In the 1990s, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) was set up. ECRI’s remit is to combat racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, and intolerance. This suggests a potential conflict with the freedoms of speech and expression. The fact that many people prefer other constitutional articles to the freedom of speech was deplored by the media and the Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn early in 2002. Fortuyn declared that, “when forced to choose,” he would prefer the constitutional right of free speech over the first article in the Dutch constitution, the prohibition of discrimination (*Volkscrant*, 9 February 2002; see also Eckardt 2003).

I will mention only briefly another trend in recent years, which is of growing importance to the question of freedom of speech and artistic expression—the matter of copyrights. Among scholars and judges, there is a concern for the steady proliferation of intellectual property rights. The reason is that an overstretched protection may be in conflict with the general interest and may impinge on the freedom of speech. In a world where one cannot even use the words ‘refreshes best’ because they are copyrighted, the public domain is declining (Hugenholtz 2000). With copyrights on enormous collections of music and photographs being sold for billions of dollars to the world’s richest companies (e.g., Sony) and wealthiest people (e.g., Bill Gates), general and cheap access to this cultural heritage—a basic human right—is in danger.

Public Art and the Democratization of Politics

The pseudo-religion of modern abstract art, informed and promoted by both governmental and artistic authorities, created a gap within parts of the wider public, which sometimes did not ‘understand’ this art at all and often openly despised it. The question of what exactly constitutes art became more and more confusing, even for the cultural theorists. This had already been the case since the early twentieth century. Avant-garde art itself was full of iconoclasm, especially in relation to museum art. Marcel Duchamp put a signed pissoir

in a museum and suggested using a Rembrandt as an ironing board. Jean Tinguely built art machines that eventually destroyed themselves.

In the 1960s, some artists wanted museums to be burned down because they were “the coffins of art.” Art had to be democratized and put on public display. This theory became practice in the 1970s, when the aim of art was both embellishment and giving meaning to the living environment of the ordinary citizen. Democratized art in a way became a state ideology in some countries, celebrating the welfare state and at the same time civilizing the people. However, the manner in which this ideology was produced and presented can be regarded as paternalistic.

As a result of the democratization of art since the 1970s, the definition question became clearer and lost any aura of scholarly value. As Joseph Beuys declared, every object could be considered art and everybody could be an artist (Harrison and Wood 1992: 890). The ultimate consequence is that everybody can therefore be considered an art critic, regardless of formal educational or artistic background (Beunders 2000). Up to today, Beuys’s statement is still popular among cultural theorists and artists themselves: art is whatever the artist says it is, and art is sacred, to be protected forever by the authorities. This is the arrogance of the art world that caused a backlash in society against some pieces of modern art. In the center of the debate and political strife were some specific pieces of public art and the question as to whether the state had to fund artists and pieces of art that ‘insulted’ the very people whose taxes had paid for its production and exhibition (Mitchell 1992).

The question of what art is might have been solved by Beuys. The public and political question of what *public art* is was not. The British “think tank for public art practice,” ixia, which receives funding from the Arts Council England, answers this question online: “The practice of public art is diverse ... As a result public art is difficult to define.”² Obviously, this definition does not provide much resolution for the clarity-seeking audience. Even the free online encyclopedia project Wikipedia gives a better definition: “The term ‘public art’ properly refers to works of art in any media that [have] been planned and executed with the specific intention of being sited or staged in the public domain, usually outside and accessible to all.”³ The advantage of this wide definition is that it puts an end to the judicial and political distinctions between all kinds of different media, of which ‘the press’ was historically thought of as the most prominent and most protected in democracies.

In recent times we have witnessed the transformation of all kinds of technical media and the consequent blurring of definitions, like the one on public art. Now we acknowledge that monuments, memorials, and civic statuary are public art and that architecture and the man-made landscape also fulfill that definition. Increasingly, our whole environment, whether represented by permanent materials or by temporary graffiti and festivals, is seen as public art. Initiating, funding, and sanctioning by the authorities are no longer considered the distinctive criteria.

However, from the 1960s into the 1990s state funding was the main issue. First it was a welcome vehicle for positive change, later a scapegoat for all

kinds of artistic unease and societal frustration. The ideological foundations of the ‘percent of art’ policies in most countries in the West, in which a certain percentage of the construction costs has to be spent on public art in or outside a public building, were all about changing the environment—and the citizens themselves—for the better.

In 2005, *ixia* provided a list of claims that have been made over the last few decades about the value that public art brings to public places and the people in general. Among these assertions are that public art:

- Enhances the physical environment
- Creates a sense of place and distinctiveness
- Contributes to community cohesion
- Contributes to social health and well-being
- Contributes to economic value through inward investment and tourism
- Fosters civic pride and confidence
- Raises the quality of life
- Reduces crime⁴

One may notice the strong emphasis on presupposed socio-economic effects in all these claims. Furthermore, there is a total lack of the factors that caused the explosion of public art in the century before 1940: national identity, national pride, national unity, and national destiny. Although in practice the welfare state was in essence a nationalistic enterprise, resulting in great uncertainties and social unrest when it eroded, since World War II the combination of individualistic and cosmopolitan—local and global—well-being was at the heart of the public art enterprise.

As is common with new ideologies, the benefits of public art were taken for granted. As of yet, they still are not very well researched. There are dozens of case studies on specific examples of public art, but studies that examine the relationship between public art of the welfare state and the public realm over a longer period of time are rare. Incidentally, this is in sharp contrast to the multitude of studies on the political and psychological effects of public art in Christian feudal Europe and in twentieth-century United States and Europe leading up to World War II.

What happened after the launch of the ‘percent for art’ policy in most Western countries was that the artistic field claimed an ever more important role for artists in the public domain. In some European countries, the permanent funding of artists themselves, no matter what art they produced, was tied to the emancipation of ‘the artist’. Assured of his or her income, the artist became almost totally independent. As a consequence, the post-war attitude that art had to be critical was sometimes taken to extremes.

With ‘balance’ as the key word in the weighing of rights and duties, public art can be used in several ways—as an effective tool of social emancipation, as a means of establishing a dialogue in tense situations (as with mural art), but also as a weapon of propaganda to achieve a political goal. It was Lenin who ordered the installation of the public art of heroes and artists in almost every

village in his revolutionary Soviet Union. In the West, the line between graffiti and 'guerrilla' art is thin.

For decades, the definition of public art has been the preserve of artists, cultural theorists, and state commissioners, a peculiar fact since most definitions assume some kind of interaction with a public audience. Until the early 1980s, this audience was seldom asked for their opinion about planned pieces of public art, not even when the installations were to be put in the immediacy of their own neighborhood or in central places of the public domain. The backlash of this paternalistic neglect would be powerful, and it is still raging today. The list of controversies over pieces of public art is almost endless.

The online list of acts of censorship presented by the National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC), founded in the US in 1974, is growing longer and longer. The main goal, formulated according to the spirit of the 1970s, was "to protect artists' rights to participate in the democratic dialogue by defending public access to their work and supporting their ability to freely express views that might be unpopular or controversial."⁵ In due time the emphasis shifted to organizing educational programs, in order to counter censorship attempts. NCAC now recognizes that 'the public' is important: "Censorship has been around for as long as there has been creative expression; no doubt, censorship attempts will be part of our future. However, the degree of public support for free speech has always made a difference—the difference between silent repression and a lively debate. We keep the debate not only alive, but healthy."⁶

The NCAC over the years seems to have discovered two things: that 'public support' is necessary and that the question of censorship is not as simple as the name of the organization suggests. One example, in 2001, from the long list of acts of censorship will suffice to illustrate the recognition of the fact that in matters of free speech and censorship, there are only gray areas. "A Seattle gallery chose to move artwork from the front to the back room ... after the provocative nature of the photographs prevented patrons from moving throughout the entire gallery to view other artists' works. This incident questions where the line is between censorship and permissible curatorial discretion."⁷

One of the simplifications of the post-war era was the idea that the matter of human rights and freedom of expression was a straightforward, black-and-white affair (Garry 1993). The other simplification of free speech was the idea that censorship was an offense that only 'the establishment'—political authorities and the 'religious right'—was guilty of. In reality, censorship, although political, can neither be regarded as typically left wing or right wing, nor can it be considered categorically progressive or conservative. Censorship can, on various occasions, be demanded by all segments of society. Consequently, every society has its own specific tolerance levels that sometimes are described in the penal code (Dubin 1992). In seven European countries, Holocaust denial (*Auschwitzlüge*) is forbidden by law. In early 2006, the controversial British historian David Irving was sentenced to three years in prison by an Austrian court for having written such claims 20 years earlier. In Japan, the exposure of pubic hair is forbidden. In many countries, including the United States, the desecration of national symbols, such as the flag, is forbidden.

It is invariably the dominant culture in a country that prescribes what is allowed and what is not, what kind of social behavior is allowed and what is not, whether it is about smoking or physical contact between school pupils and their teachers. As soon as a ‘counterculture’ arises, questioning the dominant culture and its codes and laws, conflicts are on the horizon.

After the 1960s, the counterculture and the artists had gained the upper hand in the field of the public arts. This era came to an end during the 1990s as a result of developments in the art world itself; as a result of the changing morals, if not moral panics, in society; as a result of the ongoing politicization of small interest groups, such as gays and lesbians, Indians and Aboriginals, who were “seeking safety in an insecure world” (Bauman 2001), and environmental groups, such as Greenpeace and animal rights movements; and, last but not least, as a result of the emergence of a multicultural society. The mass immigration to Western Europe of people from all over the world, especially from Muslim countries, has caused a novel and unsettling confrontation between liberal, secular societies and new groups that are prepared to use violence in support of their fundamentalist religious beliefs.

Moreover, the concept and acceptance of avant-garde art has been eroding further. Avant-garde art used to be characterized by three main elements: alienation, innovation, and the future. The postmodern ‘anything goes’ mentality and the commercialization of the art world have destroyed this concept. As Stuart Hobbs (1997) describes it, postmodernism took the future out of avant-gardism. For many people, artists lost their aura of authenticity and sincerity, some of them openly admitting that they were only in it for the money. Striving for innovation and pushing boundaries were seen as conventions, and, more importantly, art increasingly became a consumer commodity. Art forms that were relatively new in the post-war period, like that of Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein, by the 1980s had lost their capacity to evoke strong reactions. Some writers published books presaging turbulent times ahead, such as *The End of the American Avant Garde* (Hobbs 1997) and *After the End of Art* (Danto 1997).

In the 1990s, the art world plummeted into a state of crisis. Some artists, like Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst, deliberately chose to find ways to create art that was still able to shock people and create a scandal. Some 1990s artists openly proclaimed that provoking a strong reaction from the public was their main aim. But they meant for this reaction to be a verbal one—a discussion or a polemic in some newspaper—not a ban or the destruction of the piece of art itself. Nevertheless, destruction is exactly what has happened more and more since the 1980s. Both the general public and specific interest groups have increased their protests against works of art that insult morality, endanger the public order, and disparage their identity or religious beliefs. And here opposing positions sometimes find common ground (*les extrêmes se touchent*). In Amsterdam in 1994, two different groups of women—left-wing feminists and fundamentalist Muslims—protested a public art photograph of a half-naked woman at a bridge (Beunders 1994: 24–25).

Physical attacks on pieces of art are not a novelty. In the early twentieth century, a British suffragette attacked *The Roke by Venus*, by Diego Velasquez, because

of its masculine, sexist nature and to protest against the suppression of women (Nead 1992). Since then, many world-famous works of art have been assaulted, such as Rembrandt's *The Nightwatch* and avant-gardist Barnett Newman's *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue*, both in Amsterdam. More recently, a painting by Roy Lichtenstein in Vienna met with the same fate (Gamboni 1997).

The backlash against the prevailing counterculture and the holiness of art and the artist came from several directions. After the early 1950s attacks by US Senator Joseph McCarthy on all political and artistic expressions that he damned as "un-American activities," in the late 1960s and early 1970s attacks on free speech and 'wrong' public art came from the extreme left, in protest against the right-wing 'yellow journalism', sexist pornography, sexist commercials on television, and commercials in general. Statues of colonial heroes were brought down, and street names had to be changed because the 'historical figure' had fallen into disgrace due to the ever-changing perspective of the past. Colonialism, collaboration during wartime, and apartheid caused bitter struggles in local communities over symbols in the public domain that had to be erased, and subsequently replaced by statues or names of people and deeds that were more in tune with the norms and values of the current times. From the 1970s onward, special interest groups claimed ownership over their own image. And, last but not least, the 'common man' started to raise his voice against specific forms of public art she or he did not want to see as a memorial or as a symbol for the nation—or simply did not want to encounter on the way to work.

When one of the best-known public controversies, the *Tilted Arc* controversy, is taken into account, we discover that the era of protest against enforced public art has already lasted a quarter of a century. Since its installation in 1981 and subsequent removal in 1989 from New York City's Federal Plaza, noted sculptor Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* has been a touchstone for debates over the role of public art. Immediately after it was installed, the 10-foot-high, 120-foot-long curved wall of self-rusting steel became a magnet for criticism. Art critics labeled it the city's worst public sculpture, with many denouncing it as an example of the elitism associated with art, while others saw it as an obstacle to the use and enjoyment of the plaza (Senie 2001). The debate was in fact about public funding of the arts and not, for instance, about the universal right of enjoyment of the arts. After a jury voted to remove it, the piece ended up in a government warehouse in Maryland.

A few years later, Robert Hughes (1993) published his book *The Culture of Complaint*. In it, he denounced the antipathetic reactions by special identity/interest groups to all forms of public utterances or public art that they believe have insulted their private identity. Hughes's call for more moderate, modest, and tolerant behavior by citizens did not meet with a receptive audience. The culture wars continued apace. National scandals and lawsuits ensued over exhibitions of photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano, for example (Dubin 2000). Also, in many local municipalities, smaller but just as bitter struggles were fought over symbolism in the public domain.

Most democratic countries have not yet seen the end of the outbreaks of popular protests against public art and court cases involving it. For an essay on art and

ensorship in the mid-1990s Netherlands, I could easily sum up a list of hundreds of cases of secretly or openly vandalized or totally destroyed pieces of public art. In the Netherlands, some controversies grew into national debates, just as happened in New York with its *Tilted Arch* incident (Beunders 1994: 12–40).

What has to be noted is the difference between several countries in the West with regard to the Christian religion. Art that could be considered anti-Christian—Serrano’s *Piss Christ* (1987) and Chris Ofili’s painting, *The Holy Virgin Mary* (1996), depicting a black Madonna with cut-outs from pornographic magazines and elephant dung—met with much more resistance in the US and Britain than in Western European countries, such as France, the Netherlands, and Scandinavia, where secularization had become predominant since the 1960s. A Dutch judge decided not to prohibit the Serrano exhibition in the late 1990s, and what is more illuminating, the museum that displayed the photographs drew hundreds of thousands of people to a relatively remote part of the Netherlands.

Religion and Public Art

The factor of religion brings us to the last element that in the early twenty-first century makes the fate of public art even more complex than it has already become. In the struggle since the 1950s between traditional dominant national culture and the counterculture of the post-war generation, the most recent ‘party’ that joined the stage, Islam, has created the same panic in society as the counterculture did around 1968 among ‘silent majorities’ in the US, France, and elsewhere in the West. Whereas the answer of the old elites to the counterculture in the 1960s had been quite simple—giving in—this time the panic is perhaps even greater. No the acts and counter-acts that are triggered by feelings of degradation among ethnic and religious minorities will not be resolved with sit-ins. This time protest is mainly ventilated through violent means, like death threats and acts of (mass) murder.

The current helplessness of authorities in multicultural societies in Western Europe on the issue of the freedom of expression is, as said, proof that arrogance is bound to be punished, sooner or later. After the arrogance of white supremacy in the 1950s and of the state-subsidized ‘independent’ artists in the 1970s, the rather arrogant idea took hold that artistic freedom and ‘anything goes’ could last forever because it provided us with the best of all possible worlds. Francis Fukuyama (1989), in a dramatic denial of the force of history and of the effects that changes in social, political, and religious beliefs and in demography would have on society and on the arts, saw in it “the end of history.”

The idea that the secular, modern, democratic, and free Western world would remain peaceful in the aftermath of an influx of immigrants, and that the millions of newcomers from all over the world would adjust peaceably to the beliefs and practices of their new European homelands, was a dramatic error. Whatever one thinks of Huntington’s views on the clash of civilizations, the fact is that in the secularized European countries, the role of religion, which was viewed as a primitive thing of the past, had been disregarded.

The first country that realized with a shock that this secularization had left it empty-handed in the face of the rising religion of Islam was the Netherlands. Because of the lack of dialogue with Muslims, and the lack of knowledge of religion in general, the panic was great after the brutal killing of writer-filmmaker Theo van Gogh by a Muslim fundamentalist in 2004 (Buruma 2006). Van Gogh, a controversial artist, pushed the envelope of freedom of expression as far as he could. He sealed his fate when, together with Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a former Somali refugee turned member of Parliament and a fierce critic of the anti-female violence of fundamentalist Islam, he made an 11-minute movie on the abuse of women in Islam. Not long after this movie was shown on television, van Gogh was ritually slaughtered, and the killer promised that Hirsi Ali would soon follow. As a result, the Dutch authorities guarded her 24 hours a day.⁸

In September 2005, purportedly to highlight the topic of self-censorship in the media, the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* published a series of cartoons on Islam that resulted in often violent protests and consumer boycotts by Muslims throughout the world. Afterwards, the paper, according to the *International Herald Tribune* (7 February 2006), declared to have done so as an experiment to see whether political satirists were capable of being as harsh to Islam as they are to other organized religions.

What is so striking about the reactions of the authorities and most parts of the public was the lack of willingness to defend the freedom of speech and expression and the full exercise of those freedoms by artists like Theo van Gogh and the Danish cartoonists. While some political reactions to the killing of van Gogh and the burning of embassies in the wake of the Danish cartoons were of high indignation, the predominant response in politics and the press was: “Freedom of expression has to be defended, but maybe they had gone too far.” On 9 February 2006, the British weekly, *The Economist*, summarized this lukewarm response of some Western governments, accompanied by apologies to Voltaire, as follows: “I disagree with what you say, and even if you are threatened with death, I will not defend very strongly your right to say it.” In the US and Britain, both at war in Afghanistan and Iraq, the cartoons were not published.

The Art of Persuasion

In a fully media-oriented world, we can no longer make a distinction between different forms of artistic expression. In this globalized world of immediate communication, every art form—whether permanent or temporary—can instantly be seen all over the world. In a politically tense situation, everything can be used to create uproar or to score points in the struggle for emancipation, for beliefs, for anything people strive for, in the positive or negative sense. Among the slogans used by all proponents of maximum freedom since the Enlightenment, the words of Benjamin Franklin still endure: “They that can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety.” In fact, history and politics over the centuries has proved that liberty expands in times when there is little outside resistance and shrinks when the pressure grows.

In the early twenty-first century, there seems to be more outside pressure than in many decades before. Furthermore, the pressure is now more diverse since it is coming from all directions. The restrictions that are consequently being put on public art are successful because the maxim ‘victory is not caused by the strength of the attackers but by the weakness of the defenders’ is as true as it ever was. The crisis in modern art itself is one of the main reasons for the half-hearted attitude of the politicians and the public to defend artistic freedom.

After a half-century of modernist dominance, both the public and the decision makers grew weary of the promises of modern art. From the mid-1980s on, they began asking for the reintegration of public art and public purpose. As Lanzone put it: “We now live in an age of mass ‘realpolitik.’”⁹ He could not have been more right. Groups, organizations, and even private individuals, regardless of their interests, can dramatically affect the course and outcome of public decision making through the tenacious application of well-orchestrated criticism. Our culture resonates with unpredictability, which has resulted in surprising new forms of social and political anxiety about old and new ‘folk devils’ (Cohen 1972). Public officials have become fearfully nervous and apprehensive in their decision making.

I call this new situation the ‘revenge of the people’ on the arrogance of the arts (that is, arts commissioners) and the hubris of some artists. Is there cause to be pessimistic about the fate of public art? Not really. In fact, we have returned to the pre-World War II situation in which commissioned artists predictably had to conform to the national cultural and social standards. Now, ‘national’ means that artists have to adjust to the demands of many interests groups and of the recipient community in particular. That is democracy: more struggles, more debate, more compromises.

The pieces of public art that have been the most successful in recent years show how great the public interest is in the narrative, well-humored, and symbolic communication of public art. It is true that the public artists who are the most successful have had to become more like well-skilled process managers, sometimes perhaps more skilled in the ‘art of persuasion’ than in art itself. In other words, to be successful means to build up a career of past positive performances, both as an artist and as a public diplomat. A clear example is Christo. It took him more than two decades to convince the government of the German Federal Republic that wrapping up the Reichstag, the symbolically heavily loaded Parliament building in Berlin, with recyclable man-made materials for 14 days was a good idea. But in the end, in 1995, Christo succeeded. Millions of tourists from all over the world traveled to Berlin.

One might call this new form of globalized, mass-appealing public art the ‘Disneyfication’ of art. The only alternative seems to be politicians with enough power to overrule all kinds of democratic processes, such as prime ministers and presidents. However, their ‘great works’ of public art, such as London’s Millennium Dome, are not as universally admired as they had no doubt hoped. The fine truth about the fine arts is that people in the West these days yearn for common moments of experience and artistic visions of truth or beauty, and this yearning seems to intensify. Thus, there is no reason to believe that politicians

will stop promoting public art. While they might have a more reluctant attitude, in anticipation of possible future criticism, making pragmatic adjustments to new socio-political circumstances is the heart of the political profession.

Although we are going through a phase of uncertainty, with restraint in public expressions and downright censorship and self-censorship in the media, the many examples of very successful public art give reason to believe that there is a need for public art in the multicultural society as well. This public art will change, no doubt. It may even occur that, thanks to the large Muslim minorities in many European countries, geometric abstract art will return, pushing aside once again the now popular figurative art. So be it. The only requirement for public art in this century is the persistence of the democratic 'art of persuasion'.

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Notes

1. See <http://www.chihuly.com/essays/lanzoneessay.html>.
2. See <http://www.ixia-info.com/publicart/index.htm>.
3. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public_art.
4. See <http://www.ixia-info.com/research/index.htm>.
5. See http://www.ncac.org/advocacy_projects/Arts_Advocacy.cfm.
6. Ibid.
7. See http://www.ncac.org/action_issues/Race_Ethnicity_Gender.cfm.
8. After remaining in the Netherlands for two years, Hirsi Ali is presently a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think tank, in Washington, DC. She has again been granted security protection due to death threats she has received from Muslims in the United States.
9. See <http://www.chihuly.com/essays/lanzoneessay.html>.

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