

Notes on "Artwork in Public Spaces" from the Perspective of Culture and Social Ecology

If artworks are to become a subject for the social sciences, the first to take interest would probably be sociology. The approach of sociology, even before it became an acknowledged discipline, relates to two circles of questions. On the one hand, it is the so-called social function of art, e.g. all possible roles of art in the process of social integration, its cognitive, communicative and other functions, on the other hand, it is the issue of respect for the space of free art creativity, which is substantially different in various single cultures and historical periods.

The perspective used in so far divergent streams of human ecology is also different from classical approaches of social sciences. Ecology -- one of the "products" of the evolution theories of the 19th century -- defined as "the study of organisms in their natural habitation" (Odum, 1977, p.17) is concerned with the conditions of the origin and continuous existence of species in time and space. At present, with the boom of neo-evolutionist theories centered on the study of the conditions of the origin and existence of a modern man, we can say that art and artistic activity are among the basic conditions of the existence of humankind on this planet. The still growing number of hypotheses on the beginnings of artistic expression, motives of the origin of this phenomenon and its original meaning include many diverse and contradictory arguments, but there is a certain agreement on a number of initial assumptions, today regarded as proven. The palaeontologist and anthropologist Richard Leakey, who devoted a great deal of his attention to the "language of art" in his interpretation of the origins of humankind, defines modern Homo sapiens as a being with "a sense of technology and innovation, capable of artistic expression, with an introspective awareness and sense of morality" (Leakey, 1996, p. 85). He ranks artistic expression among the four basic signs of humanity without which we, as a species, would not have survived. His approach corresponds to knowledge of similarly oriented researchers, as for instance the socio-biologist Edward O. Wilson, who talks about "the capacity for a specific aesthetic judgement" that is a permanent precondition of our successful adaptation to our social and material environment (Wilson, 1993, p. 13). The anthropologist Jan Benes closes his discussion on the origins and functions of early Palaeolithic art by stating that "artistic sensibility has imprinted itself on the inward memory (genetic base) of humankind" (Benes, 1994, p. 135). The doctor and zoologist, Konrad Lorenz in fact answers the question about the sense of artistic expression when he ranks among the basic cognitive processes the figurative (total, shape) perception which should be cultivated, as must the ability to think rationally and logically (scientifically), in that the role of shape perception is "to reveal relations between sensual data or even between higher units of perception" (Lorenz, 1997, p. 88). He conjoins the function of the "figurative" cognitive process with the ability and need to "perceive in harmony the utmost complex polyphonic mutual effects and to react to minor breaches in an analogically sensitive way as a conductor would to a wrong note" (c.d., p. 45).

All in all, it could be said that all these authors agree on the fact that artistic activity and artistic perception have always had (and still have) at least the same importance for the successful existence of the humankind as all those activities which serve to meet our everyday existential needs, and to which the existence of humankind is often reduced.

Space is one of the central categories of cultural and social ecology. From the evolutionist point of view, this may be briefly presented as follows: in natural ecosystems each species has its own niche, its safe and comprehensible space, defining the conditions and borders of its existence. Man,

however, alone among all species, was not given this niche by nature or by God. On the grounds of the concept of evolution, such as is acknowledged today, it should be obvious that the niche belongs to the in-depth needs of any existence, including that of humankind. Therefore the fact that the niche was not predestined for humans can be considered as one of the crucial stimuli for human activity. A need for orientation and safety is one of the most important needs of humankind, and we have to create our own niche by means of signs and symbols which serve to make single spaces comprehensible, legible and individual, that is to say functions that commonly associate notions of home, dwelling, identification with space, genius loci etc.

The human niche is a term that is common in anthropology and sociology in the English-speaking world. If we define it as a "space for dwelling", it becomes obvious that we draw inspiration rather from the European philosophical tradition, especially from Heidegger's "philosophical - poetic" concept of dwelling and Eliade's exposition of the motives for creating sacred spaces. According to Heidegger, "dwelling depends on writing poetry" (Heidegger, 1993, p. 79), because it is "only writing poetry that brings man to the Earth, leads him there and thus takes him into his dwelling", the structure of which expresses a very specific comprehension of the relations between the being on the Earth and "looking up to heavens" (c.d., p. 85 and 87). Heidegger's ideas are adopted in the theory of architecture in explanations of the term genius loci, which expresses the result of creating such dwelling spaces in which the coalescence of existence and existential dimensions creates "meanings" due to which the human being is fulfilled as being in the world. Mircea Eliade follows a similar direction, His exposition of the relation between "the sacred and the profane" is situated in a space that, if we are to avoid the feeling of "uneasiness and disorientation", has to contain certain footholds representing man's idea of the world order. He says that "settling down in a certain place, arranging it and inhabiting it, are all acts that presuppose an existential choice -- the choice of the Universe that the given community is willing to accept as its own by creating it." (Eliade, 1994, p. 22 and 26).

If we relate knowledge of contemporary neo-evolutionist scientific research to philosophical discussions of the relationship between existence and the existential dimensions of being, or between the sacred and profane transferred into the form of space, it is possible to raise the issue of the loss of the "sounding inter-space" (Stary, 1992), that is to say the "existential situation" of people in the technocratic age, in which, on the one hand, spaces of high culture and artistic value are being petrified to such an extent that they become open-air museums lacking the dynamics of everyday life, and, on the other hand, new amorphous housing estates are "built" taking over empty space, lacking any artistic expression whatsoever.

The enclosure of art into studios and exhibition halls, together with the reduction of its functions into a past time, is a logical outcome of the "instrumental rationality" of the modern age, i.e. the utmost specialization of those human activities that were only complementary in the course of the evolutionary process, for the greater part of historic development. In these circumstances, the return of art into life in its entirety can signify the acknowledgement of its role both in the building of the "image of the world" and in the fostering of all the signs of humanity that are endangered in the technocratic age. (See Lorenz, 1997).

Here we get back, although by a new and different path, to the issue of the social functions of art. This is a term, however, that many artists may legitimately dislike. If a great number of scientists all

over the world (e.g. Friedrich Capra, Ignazio Prigogine, Rupert Sheldrake) are becoming more and more convinced that the results of scientific research always have an impact on the overall cultural climate, whether scientists themselves acknowledge this fact or not, it is difficult to imagine that artistic activity should not have the same effect. When Richard Leakey evaluates various explanations of "the mystery of sense" of early Palaeolithic art, he aligns himself with those authors who claim that the "mystery of meaning" is always connected to culture since art constitutes a part of "the threads of the cultural fabric... in which each thread contributes to the meaning of the whole" (Leakey, c.d., p. 105 and 106). Here he is speaking about a time era approximately 34 to 10 thousand years BC. From the evolutionary point of view, something that has once been created does not disappear, at most it can be transferred to another place in the overall structure of being. And the project "The Artwork in Public Spaces" may at least bring us some indication whether the view held by paleo-anthropologists can also be adopted by the bearers of "industrial progress" at the end of the 20th century.

Jitka Ortova

Department of Culture Studies, Philosophical Faculty of Charles University, Prague

(translated by Katerina Pavlickova)

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