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Felix Gonzalez-Torres  
Public and Private: Spheres of Influence, 1993

Everything that happens in culture happens because it is needed. Even this series of panels ['Power and Responsibility: Art Institutions and Cultural Change'] and the subject of this particular panel. Once more, the cultural left, and the left in general, finds itself reacting to an agenda or trap devised by the ruling oligarchy: agendas and symbolic issues used to deflect meaning and any kind of profound and constructive analysis of the many crises that we as a nation are now experiencing. One of the subjects of this panel, the public, is a term that is becoming very charged and very used in the political and cultural arena, as we must have noticed by now. But I must say that I am not very interested in the public as such, but in its opposite, in what makes the construction of the public possible, and that is the private.

In order to conceptualize what we as a culture define as public, we must also create a private, let's say (in a very simplistic and illustrative manner) a kind of outdoors versus an indoors - just to set two parameters. But is it really possible, at this point in history, to create such spheres, and if so, for what purpose, and to serve whose agendas?

Our most intimate fantasies, desires, projections, internal dialogues and ever-shifting identities are bisected, influenced and ruled by public discourse, legislations and the law. But before we go on, we should question where this public construction comes from. We know that the word public has been around for centuries, but what is its real history in terms of how we use this term, 'the public', now? When did it come into being? Why was it needed? And by whom? Was the public always there, just waiting to be discovered, waiting to be addressed, or did it perhaps become a necessity in an industrial society in which a group of people with similar consuming habits and power suddenly became 'a public', a market segment ready to be acknowledged through advertisements? Was the formation of a generalized desire for consumer items related to this event? And did the creation of museums have something to do with this newly available resource. the public?

Recently, right-wing politicians and their allies in the religious industry have taken it upon themselves to defend this 'public', this public set of values, these community standards, now termed traditional family values (remember?). This public, turned god-fearing, hard-working, patriotic Americans. But why now?

As I said before, everything happens in culture because it is needed, and after more than a decade of steadily increasing economic disparities, it is imperative for those responsible for this crisis to find highly-charged symbolic gestures with which the so-called general public will readily identify itself, and quickly take sides. Hopefully theirs. These keepers of the status quo are in a very precarious situation and have clearly anticipated the need to deploy mirrors of debate that would effectively deflect any formulation of a meaningful discussion.

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It is no accident that culture is now the new battleground. After all, the economic and social changes that the Reagan regime sought to bring about are now an accomplished deal. Our national deficit in 1980 was 74 billion, but by 1990 we had a deficit of 221 billion. In 1981 there were ten bank failures, in 1985 there were 120, and by 1988 we had more than 200. In 1980 the ratio of the US government budget for housing to its budget for the military was one to five. By 1989 it was one dollar for housing and 31 dollars for the military industrial complex. Since 1980 the Federal support for housing assistance has been slashed by more than 80 percent and the supply of low-income rental units has dropped dramatically as a result of demolition and conversion. But at the same time, during those get-tough-on-crime years, we were busy expanding and building larger jails to house part of the American family. In New York State, during the last decade, the prison space doubled at a cost of five billion dollars. Often the state resorted to urban development corporation financing - a corporation originally intended to house poor people in new city apartments, not in new prisons.

According to the New York Times, 13 September 1992, the nation's incarcerated population increased by nearly 130 percent during the last decade. We have the highest rate of imprisonment of any industrialized nation. In second place is South Africa, of course. Moreover, it should come as no surprise that, yes, class is a factor in who goes to jail. Sixty percent of inmates had incomes of less than \$10,000 at the time of their arrest. Racism and class are usually part of the equation in many of our repressive state apparatuses. Federal drug officials have described the typical cocaine user as a white male high-school graduate living in a small city, or suburb. However, the famous 'war on drugs' has been waged mostly on poor, urban, mostly minority neighbourhoods.

Talking of neighbourhoods, according to the Census Bureau, mobile homes were the fastest growing type of dwelling in the 1980s, as the cost of traditional houses soared beyond the reach of many. Nearly 16 million Americans - about one in six - now live in mobile homes.

During the last decade, we witnessed one percent of American households getting richer. By 1989, the top one percent were worth more than the bottom 90 percent of Americans. In the last 15 years the number of children living in poverty increased by 21 percent. In 1992 seven percent of all infants, and nearly 17 percent of all African-American infants, were born underweight- the highest rate since 1978. According to the Children's Defense Fund, the number of children living in poverty grew by more than one million during the 1980s. The state with the highest child poverty rate is Mississippi - home state for the distinguished American Family Association. According to Dr. Jennifer Howse, who led the march on the Dimes Birth Defect Foundation in 1992, the proportion of pregnant women receiving no pre-natal care or late care was 25 percent, the highest it had been for nearly 20 years.

After the unfortunate but almost predictable Los Angeles rebellion of 1992, new levels of cynicism were established by the conservative demagogues, when they blamed the social programmes of the 1960s and 70s for the violence. We must remember, in order to combat the right's re-reading of history, that those social programmes of the 60s helped to cut the poverty rate almost in half, and poverty amongst the elderly by an even greater degree; that the war on poverty in the 60s (as opposed to the war on the poor that the Reagan and Bush regimes waged during the 1980s) brought to many needy Americans medical care, food stamps, pre-natal and infant care, legal services, college tuition and guaranteed student loans which indeed enabled many of us to forge a better life. Such poverty programmes, according to an editorial in The New York Times, 6 May 1992, brought the poverty rate down from 19 percent in 1964 to 11 percent in 1973.

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Since 1981, direct Federal aid to cities has dropped by 60 percent, and in 1984 the Children's Defense Fund budget declared, 'Each week 211 American children die from poor maternal and child health and nutrition while we continue to subsidize tobacco growers by 3.3 million dollars a week.' I bet you haven't heard the American Family Association rally the famous taxpayer on public opinion in reaction to this situation. We now rank 20th among industrialized nations in preventing infant mortality, and when it comes to immunizing infants against polio, we now rank behind sixteen other nations, including Mexico.

5 March 1992: According to the Congressional Budget Office, an outsized 60 percent of the growth in after-tax income of all American families between 1977 and 1989 went to the wealthiest 660,000 families. At the same time, the American family right in the middle of the income distribution saw its income edge up only four percent. And the bottom 40 percent of families experienced actual declines in their income.

According to the Census Bureau (4 November 1992), the number of Americans living in poverty soared in 1991 by 2.1 million and the poverty rate rose for the second consecutive year to 14.2 percent - the highest since 1964. A family of four is classified as poor if it had a cash income of less than 13,924 dollars in 1991. The government sets the poverty line by using the consumer price index to determine the cost of a minimally adequate diet and multiplying that by three - wrongly assuming that a household spends one third of its budget on food and that two-thirds can cover everything else. Today, just two necessities, food and housing, take approximately 85 percent of a typical poor family budget. Falling workers' wages and lower corporate taxes during the fabulous 1980s swelled the ranks of millionaire corporate executives. The average corporate executive, who earned as much as 41 factory workers or 38 teachers in 1960, was earning as much as 93 factory workers or 72 teachers by 1988.

According to the Census Bureau, after adjustment for inflation, the median household income has declined 5.1 percent since 1989, and household purchasing power is lower now than in 1979. Even if we wanted to return to a welfare state, it would be rather difficult. We have successfully become the Savings and Loan bailout state: according to government figures of 1992, we now spend six dollars on this bailout for one dollar on welfare. In terms of cutbacks in social benefits - let's take New York City as a good example of the attack against the urban centre launched in the past decade - according to a report issued by the late New York congressman Ted Weis, the percentage of New York City budget supported by Federal funds decreased from 17.9 percent in 1981 to 9.3 percent in 1990. The cumulative loss in Federal aid between 1981 and 1990, adjusted for inflation, was 19 billion dollars. The city government spent 755 million in 1990 alone simply to replace lost Federal aid. The city estimated that those funds could have been spent instead to hire 3,000 more nurses, 3,700 school teachers, 2,800 more firefighters, and 2,800 police officers. In 1980 there were 30 soup kitchens in New York City. By 1989 there were 600. Conservatives have always seen the urban areas as centres of intellectual challenge, magnets for immigrants, and centres of political ferment and agitation.

One of the dangers of our technological explosion of information is that it does not guarantee an informed or literate public. We have an explosion of information bytes and at the same time an implosion of meaning. The statistics of the economic decline of the so-called typical family, the general public, or the famous taxpayer, means very little to most people. One of the effects of the division of labour is the representation of facts and/or issues as completely unrelated, separated, isolated, independent of each other. Meaning is mostly created when we can relate our identity to

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a piece of information. And it is precisely this that the right has been so smart at understanding and using for its own benefit. We haven't seen the religious industry and its conservative politicians getting into the debate on the need for more affordable housing, or the need to establish some sort of gun control. These vital issues take too long to explain, and the fundamentalist Christian businessmen have long ago recognized that, as with any other capitalist venture, in order to survive and grow in a 'free market' environment, it has to deploy eye-catching advertisements, and create fast-product recognition.

According to Pat Robertson, one of the leaders of the fundamentalist Christian industry, abortion rights is a dead political issue. (But don't take his word for it.) With the threat of Communism, body snatchers, Martian and/or Sandinist invasions, and the Evil Empire a thing of the past, the need for a new product container or new packaging becomes urgent to this industry of hate, ignorance and fear. The need to distort and step on the truth becomes more extreme.

During the 1992 elections, in a hate-mail campaign opposing the passing of the Equal Rights Amendment in the State of Iowa, Pat Robertson, in his very humanist Republican self, wrote: 'The Equal Rights Amendment will lead women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism, and become lesbians.' I wonder if, after all, this might actually be beneficial for women. I don't know the statistics for accidents in the practice of witchcraft or lesbianism, but I do know that according to the American Medical Association, more women are injured each year in domestic violence than in muggings or car accidents combined. But misogyny is not enough to keep a sales campaign alive. Enter now the profitable spectre of the 'homosexual agenda'.

You may already be asking, or perhaps you were doing so a while ago, what do all these statistics and/or issues have to do with an analysis of the spheres of influence of public and private? Well, they have a lot to do with it. They have to do with the reclaiming of language, meaning and the re-framing of this discussion. As I mentioned at the very beginning, things have a history in our culture, and the separation between public and private does not escape this, in the same way that the expected role of the artist within our strict division of labour is supposed to remain static and conform to our assigned production. But it is precisely when we cross the ideological boundaries that we begin to make connections, we begin to create coalitions and to see a more precise picture of our present, not just the projection of ideological shadows which so many times we take to be reality. This is an attempt at trying to understand how public opinion can be manipulated into accepting that some people are more equal than others, and that some private spaces are more public than others. This was demonstrated by the landmark 1986 Supreme Court decision on *Bowers vs Hardwick*, in which the state ruled that the bed is a site where we are not only born, where we die, where we make love, but it is also a place where the state has a pressing interest, a public interest. The court ruled that, according to age-old community standards, and religious dogma, the State could declare illegal certain sexual practices, even among consenting adults. (In this case it was sodomy between two men.) The court and the state once again sanctioned the public/ private oppression or a whole group or people, based solely on ,1 private act. This public oppression is not an abstraction. It is translated into pain in the flesh, into Proposition 9 in Oregon, and Proposition 2 in Colorado, and next in Idaho, Florida and others. It is translated into fear and violence. According to press reports, crime against lesbians and gays increased by 30 percent in Denver in the week following the passage of Amendment 2. And according to a national gay and lesbian report, there has been a 161 percent increase since 1988 in the number of anti-lesbian and gay attacks in five major cities where data was collected.

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There is no private sphere in the modern state. We can only speak about private property. There is no private space, no private entity. At least not for certain groups when it is still legal and endorsed by the state to oppress and discriminate because of who we love in private and, yes, outdoors too.