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Negotiating Positionality: The Insides, Outsides and In-Betweens by Jessica Wyman

In mid-September 2004, three discussions open to the public were held in three locations that are varyingly perceived as public. These conversations were intended to focus on the nature of public cultural participation, exploring possibilities, limitations and questions of access. Initiated by Kirsten Forkert and John Dummett and moderated by Marcus Miller, Paul Couillard, and Christine Shaw, participants highlighted exactly the interests (and stakes) involved in such undertakings, examining the degree to which public space is expected to be volatile and contested.

These conversations, under the overarching title *In/Out of Position*, were, perhaps most amazingly, real conversations. They were not lectures, not seminars or workshops, but opportunities for people to come together and converse on matters of political commitment and engagement. What does it mean to occupy – both for artistic purposes and more prosaic ones – the space we have come to call “public” without having interrogated what that designation signifies, nor who has designated any space or activity as such?

Forkert and Dummett’s title, *In/Out of Position*, was a source of much questioning within this process. Some of the participants wondered about the slash, the divide between the “in” and the “out,” which was important to the sessions’ organizers. This was rearticulated by Christine Shaw as through Gilles Deleuze’s “and ... and ... and ...” in which the ellipses indicate possibilities of both fullness and movement in interstitial spaces. In speech, this set of conversations was often referred to as “in and out of position,” but the slashing of In/Out seemed more fulsome than that, posing a much less certain relation to positionality. The choices of location, the audience/participants who joined in, the very notion that these discussions were meant to interrogate positionality served to highlight how fixed are our understandings of the way space functions, how limited are our understandings of the possibilities for polysemic engagement in space, site, publicness, and participation. Considering any or all of these in real ways forces us to locate and interrogate our positions precisely through their articulation.

Take as an example the three sites in which this set of conversations was held over the weekend: Friday evening’s conversation took place in the Education Theatre at the Art Gallery of Ontario; Saturday afternoon’s gathering was held at Metro Square, an outdoor civic space beside Toronto’s Metro Hall, just off King Street West; Sunday’s words were exchanged on the street in front of Mercer Union, an artist-run centre in Toronto’s west end.

Each of these venues was open to anyone who wished to participate. With this in mind, however, the AGO is inherently marked as a space of limited access and the Education Theatre, while a comfortable space in which to have a conversation, is located in the bowels of the building and unlikely to be happened upon by someone not intentionally seeking it out. While information about this set of events had been circulated and made public, it takes both foreknowledge and commitment for a person to

appear in a public art gallery on an evening when it would otherwise not be open to the public. This suggests that a person interested enough in such an event to attend is one who already feels at least somewhat comfortable entering into such an institution, one of the first of the interrogations of site and assumed privilege to be raised over the weekend.

Upon arriving at Metro Square the following day — a space all-but empty on a Saturday afternoon when the municipal offices in the adjacent building were closed for the weekend — it was discovered that without having been requested, the chairs were arranged in a wide semi-circle atop an elevated retractable stage and facing an audience-style arrangement of chairs on the plaza below. Such an imposing set-up served to announce the expectation on the part of city staff that any conversation taking place in public space would require the format of the proscenium to establish authority. This particular arrangement or architecture of space highlighted the ways in which the place one is located affects the ways in which one speaks and caused Dummett to note that the “second architecture of a space is the set of assumptions that go along with it.” This literal elevation of space caused no small amount of discomfort among the group, with Paul Couillard, that session’s discussion facilitator, refusing to become an elevated object and the entire group relocating to a space within Metro Square that was ultimately even more elevated and somewhat more remotely located within the architecture of the square.

On Sunday afternoon, the gathering at Mercer Union took place on the sidewalk in front of the artist-run centre, itself located in a part of the city that is inhabited by many artists, a neighbourhood in the process of gentrification that is replete with art galleries and cafes. Here, more than in the other two spaces, the group continued to grow as people joined the initial number, attributable perhaps to the familiarity (or accessibility) of the site to those who identified themselves as constituents of the local contemporary art community, a group that comprised the majority of the participants. Indeed, as one of the conversation’s contributors noted, we are accustomed to dealing so specifically with the local that people will often not travel to spaces with which they are unfamiliar, even when those spaces are nearby and the events of interest.

And so, this set of discussions came to be very much about the dynamics of site and public, the ways in which they are related and what is at times their very separateness. Marcus Miller, for example, pointed out that a public can be mobile within a space (as in the instance of a particular gallery retaining its audience when it moves to a new location) and that site may be much less a question of architecture or geography than of its social and cultural dimensions. This suggests that even as architectural and locational specificities have material and non-material effects on the social relations they house, perhaps too much power is thought to accrue to space (as site) itself.

And yet ... this question of space and site cannot be eliminated when considering the desired outcomes for conversations such as these. While, in the words of Paul Couillard, “architecture is usually invisible to people until attention is drawn to it,” architecture nonetheless significantly determines — even if only somatically — expectations of behaviour, activity, etc. At a basic level, entering the AGO required a presumption that one has access to such a privileged space, whereas sitting on folding chairs on a city sidewalk may not carry such valences.

But still ... the people who came to these conversations, even the one that took place on the sidewalk, were, in the vast majority, people who already felt they had a place within communities of artistic practice and/or engagement, people who felt they already had access to the language of “public” and “artistic” discourse.

And so ... while these conversations could, I think, very reasonably and perhaps even unanimously be considered “successful,” questions still remain about who speaks to and for whom in what spaces of power (or its dislocation), and whether these conversations serve to effect change in terms of real or perceived access to the making of decisions or operations in/as the public.

In all of these conversations, what remained productively unresolved was any definition of “public,” either of space or of constituent. This lack of resolution was productive, at least for me, in that when the mythical “public” (or Public) was used to denote some category of place or person, it was almost immediately complicated or refused as a marker. Marcus Miller pointed to distinctions that can and perhaps should be made between a *public* and an *audience*, noting that even special interest groups are a/the public; Christine Shaw noted that what are often called publics are groups that we hope to form/organize/bring together into communities; Paul Couillard contended that to use public space inherently challenges the possible or expected uses of space that is so often unthinkingly passed through but not inhabited or considered. Other participants suggested that the public is what we are and what we are in when we are in states of transition – between places, among people whom we do not know – and that questions that arose about responsibility to the “public” (on the part of artists, art exhibitors, etc.) too often implied a certain ignorance (however willful) on the part of the public. This marks an assumption that the capacities of both individuals and groups to come together meaningfully is fundamentally limited.

This last point is perhaps the most dangerous because this underestimation of the public is also the most true of the claims often embedded in work that is geared toward public engagement. Those of us who gathered in the AGO, on Metro Square, in front of Mercer Union were also a public, part of “the” public, even if, at those particular moments, part of a self-selected and small constituency of a much larger set of wholes. The admonition that “the public” is all too often underestimated (in terms of both interest and capacity to engage or be engaged) was readily agreed to by all present, who nonetheless seemed on the whole to consider themselves (ourselves) something other than “hoi polloi.” Why was our response to the targeted “marketing” of this event seen as less suspect than what was considered by the group to be generalized and less-considered (read: more consumer-oriented) responses to other forms of marketing?

Being public, being *the* public, and constantly negotiating the various positions and situations in which we find ourselves variously inside, outside or somewhere altogether else, is both easier and more difficult than it might seem. It is easier in that we are, always already, part of various publics, whether we choose them or not, and harder in that when we refer to “the public,” we are almost always referring to some mythical body outside of ourselves of which we are not a part. We are all of us both in *and* out of position, always taking sides, always negotiating our locations as in, out, or in between, and sometimes, as in the conversations that comprised *In/Out of Position*, all of these together.