Art in the public space and its relation with landscaping

Popa Liliana ¹

Faculty of Arts and Design from Timisoara, Visual Arts Department, 4 Oituz Street, Timisoara, Romania

*Corresponding author. Email: liliana.popa@e-uvt.ro

Abstract Visual art has never been and will never be a hermetic, self-sufficient field focused on a purely aesthetic function. On the contrary, in the course of time it has been enriched with connotations that go far beyond this status, especially after the beginning of the 2nd millennium. One might even say that contemporary art derives its strength exactly from its interference with other fields of knowledge, and more and more people acknowledge the role it plays in obtaining multiple benefits from these.

The present paper discusses a particular case among these partnerships, namely the point of confluence between art and landscaping, from the point of view of their cohabitation in the public space. The artist borrows the means, practices and material from the landscape architect, thus expanding the possibilities of art to express and relate to the world. Through such artistic manifestations, art will strengthen its role and involvement at a social level, opening new fields of critical analysis of society, raising awareness on the importance of green spaces in the urban environment, for protecting certain ecosystems or for the image projected into the world by the city.

Key words art, landscaping, public space, plants, planting, green space, parks, ecology, ecosystems, biodiversity

I. Tendencies of the interference of art with landscaping

After the appearance of such currents as Minimalism or Landart (in the 1960s), art started to use materials specific for other media; for instance, the architectural means, by industrial characteristics and serial manufacturing, or natural materials, specific for a certain place, like in the field of landscaping: ground, water, rocks, plants, etc. Thus, site-specific sculpture or environmental art has become a common practice in the Western/international art, drawing it out of its specifically destined, traditional spaces (museums, galleries, collections). In this way, the audience itself is not narrowed down to people especially dedicated to certain artistic manifestations, who interact deliberately with the artistic object. The audience is represented by the passer-by/dweller who will inevitably interact with these works of art. [1, 5]

This gesture of going out to meet the receptor but also to get actively involved in the life of the city originated in the various Avant-garde movements which wanted to break down all barriers between art and life, between the aesthetic and the functional, between the work of art and its recipient. [4]

The purpose of monuments or statues is to commemorate the past, and the locations where they are placed depend on the historical justification of that specific place. Unlike those, for the works of art especially destined for the public space it is exactly the interaction with the public, the way in which the work of art starts a dialogue with the public and the audience, in its turn, completes the work, that becomes
the decisive factor for the choice of its location and the way it communicates with that particular space.

This is the justification of art assimilation, while out on the street, as a work instrument in the architectural and landscaping field. The opposite is true as well: the artistic intervention uses the environment and the means of the landscape architect or of the architect. In other words, we find art at the confluence of all components of the surrounding environment.

The multimediacy specific for the evolution of contemporary art together with the evolution of towns, has determined, over time, the multitude of expressions of contemporary art in general, as well as of art in the public space. Thus, at present we can talk about interventions that are sculptural, installationist, performance, interactive, temporary, long-lasting, permanent, involving traditional media or, on the contrary, use new media and technologies. [1, 3, 5]

The main focus of the present study is the interaction of this type of art dedicated to the public space, with landscaping. I will not attempt to analyze all the possibilities of expression mentioned above, as it would expand this study too much. Instead, I will focus on presenting well-known examples of artists who have built their message on some practices that are specific for landscaping. More than setting their work out in open air, working in the green spaces in towns or in spaces especially designed for artistic interventions, these artists borrowed types of activities specific for landscaping, such as the simple activity of planting trees, of planting or transplanting, and, of course, the specific raw material.

II. Precursors

It is worth mentioning some precursors of the dialogue with the urban landscape, such as Joseph Beuys, Agnes Denis or Cristo & Jeanne-Claude, whose interventions in the open space had a multitude of connotations that are very important because of the fact that they were developed afterwards by other artists, and not only by artists. (Bianchi P.)

The transfer of authority from the artist to the beholder, this transformation of the viewer into a participant makes him an active part of the project of "social sculpture". This is a concept through which the artist expresses his belief that the final goal of art is to democratically transform human society.

This utopian vision, that art could be an instrument of individual and social change, has been explored by this artist through several actions. Among these, his contribution to Documenta 7, in 1982, which involved planting 7000 oaks in the town of Kassel. This meant massive mobilization of the members of the Free International University (that he founded) for five years, resulting in the reforestation of a town that had been deforested during its postwar development.

Agnes Denes also uses collaborators for an environmental work the placement and configuration of which dramatized the need for reconciliation of nature with culture. This action, Wheatfield: A Confrontation, of 1982, was conceived as a confrontation between the urban and the rural. She cultivated wheat on a construction site in the shade of the World Trade Center building in New York, and harvested it at the end of the season. Although short, the return to the agricultural past has the role of feeding the conflict between human need and human greed.

Another of this artist’s interventions, somewhat similar to Beuys’, is Tree Mountain – A Living Time Capsule – 11,000 People, 11,000 Trees, 400 Years. It consisted in 11,000 people planting 11,000 trees in a spiral structure derived both from abstract mathematics and from the natural world – the natural arrangement of sunflower seeds. Tree Mountain was designed to prevent landslides, creating a symbolic model of the collaboration of people for a common goal. It represented a permanent commitment of some of the volunteers who remained involved in environmental issues. [1]

Gary Riveschl found other original means to establish a dialog and especially to plead for nature’s right to be seen, because everything there is depends on it. Thus, in the eighties, Gary Riveschl created an installation called Break, proving the necessity to leave more space for nature within the structure of towns which are more and more taken over by the artificial environment, by man-made constructions.

The types of intervention used by this artist discuss a symbolic meaning of the creative act: the progressive growth of cities dislocates more and more of their green space, leading to loss of biodiversity and therefore of life. The artist used a shrub species (Ligustrum vulgare) usually planted as hedge and he planted it in such a way as to write a word that suggested the message he wanted to convey. [6]
Fig. 1 Gary Rieveschl, *Breakout*, Gütersloh, 1980

Fig. 2 Gary Rieveschl, *Live*, living sculpture created out of a privet hedge, in 1976
Created in 1975, *Smock Lady*, by Teresa Murak, would become her artistic signature. *Smock Lady* is actually a dress made of fast-growing cress. A piece of performance art worn by the artist herself on the streets. Thus Murak’s body becomes both a subject and an object of art that interacts with natural elements. In this fusion of matter, she took the seeds out of their immediate natural environment and offered them a new ideal place for natural growth: her warm body. [6]

**Contemporary contexts**

Anish Kapoor’s *Sky Mirror*, destined for display in the public space, is another well-known example that speaks about the interaction between the environment and art. Designed to reflect the always moving environment, the 6-metre tall concave surface (which appeared as an artistic and architectural collaboration initiated in 1995 by Nottingham Playhouse and was finalized when the work was installed in 2001), has never ceased to fascinate the public, who find their projection as an integral part of the work together with the landscape.

Famous for creating environments specific for the natural outdoor environment, such as watercourses or waterfalls, inside art museums, the Danish artist Olafur Eliasson interacted with the water environment of the city, creating a bridge over a canal in Copenhagen. He said that his inspiration for this was a memory from childhood, when he had noticed that boats created a bridge over water when anchored close to one another.

The 40-metre long bridge is made of five circular interconnected platforms, and each platform has a tall mast (boat reference). Tensioned wires are threaded between the tops of the five masts and the base of the platforms. This is an example of how art can be embedded not only aesthetically or conceptually in the structure of the city, but also functionally.
Nevertheless, interventions and the use of plants as raw matter for the expression of visual artists are not always so surprising. In the case of Tobias Rehberger, the form is rather similar with the setup of flower beds in town squares.
Thus, the veranda of Casino Luxemburg, built in 1958 according to the design by Jean Prouvé, was transformed by Tobias Rehberger from a prominent platform into a flower garden. The rigid planting structure strongly contrasts with the ephemeral character of the arrangement. Seen from above, the platform with flat beds and carefully arranged flowers conveys the idea of an abstract painting. The flower beds and the benches were especially designed according to this location; they are in relation with the steel girders of Jean Prouvé’s "Aquarium". Rehberger’s aim is to offer visitors a place of calm and rest, the possibility to relax on a bench, in the middle of greenery. The time-bound modification of the place is an attempt to shift the perception angle. The viewer can look both towards the Pétrusse valley and towards the "Aquarium" veranda where Bert’s garden is displayed. The artist proposes a dialog between these two perspectives, between these two places of calm and rest. [2,8].

This site-specific work of the German-American artist Hans Haacke was designed for the courtyard of the German Parliament. It is the artist’s answer to the motto inscribed on the front of the Parliament building that reads "DEM DEUTSCHEN VOLKE", translated into “for the German people”. The artist imitates the font to install a new motto in the courtyard, reading "DER BEVÖLKERUNG" or “for the population.”

This simple wordplay exploits the fact that in German the meaning of “people” is narrower and not synonymous with the larger idea of “population”. The entire artwork turns into a tension between the exclusive and inclusive connotations of these words. Both mottos are directed at the members of the Bundestag (the German Parliament) and suggest that their mandate must be questioned. The relation between the text and the vegetation that seems to choke it does not attach positive connotation to the latter, but rather it gives it a symbolic role, specific for the negligence with which the Parliament treats the problems of the population. [1, 2].

Fig.6 Hans Haacke, Der Bevölkerung, mix-media installation, 1999
Through his creation, Dan Graham has charted the symbiosis between architectural environments and their inhabitants. With a wide-ranging practice that encompasses curatorship, writing, performance, installations, video, photography and architecture, the artist proposes a critical engagement, most often manifest in the glass and mirror pavilions that he designed in the late 70’s and which have been built in sites all over the world.

These instruments for reflection - visual and cognitive - highlight the voyeuristic elements of design and construction in the world; situated between sculpture and architecture, it takes further the principles of the 60’s Minimalism (experimented alongside with Sol Le Witt, Donald Judd and Robert Smithson).

Graham has described his works as: "geometric forms inhabited and activated by the presence of the viewer". The pavilions make reference to buildings as instruments of expression, psychological strongholds, witnesses of social changes and prisms through which we look at others and at ourselves. Thus they talk about a sense of uneasiness and psychological alienation by constantly being placed between feelings of inclusion and exclusion. [1].

Fig.7 Dan Graham, Double Exposure, Serralves Foundation, Porto, 1995-2003
The Argentinian artist Saraceno Tomás designed a site-specific installation for the Metropolitan Art Museum in New York City. The installation, entitled “Cloud City”, is a geodesic dome made of sixteen interconnected geometric modules, in relation with the rooftop garden designed by Gerald Cantor. The angular form of the ensemble is made up of crystal segments in non-identical geometrical shapes held in place by steel joints, reinforcements and steel cables. The work expresses the artist’s interest in chemistry, biology, physics, engineering and the cosmos and the structural image created by it makes the viewer think of several universes at the same time: shapes of bacteria, clouds, neuronal organic networks, which incorporate aspects of architecture and of thinking through the reflections captured by the glass surfaces from the surrounding environment. These complex geometries that simultaneously make reference to several environments express the experiential character of Saraceno’s work. “Cloud City” is interactive: it is equipped with a set of stairs within its structure, guiding the visitors to its upper modules, where they can experience a panoramic view of the urban structure of Manhattan.

It was especially designed for the public space through its characteristics of communication and interaction with the urban environment, with the architecture and significance of its location (the inner courtyard of Theresia bastion in Timisoara) and with pedestrians walking by. Its interaction with passers-by in particular is the reason why it was placed in a walkway that became symbolically a Plato’s cave (which determines pedestrians to descend below ground level, where they can interact with the artwork, and then go up again).
Another artwork has found its location for display on an already existing architectural/landscaping project. Entitled *What about you?*, it was created in 2015 by an artist from Timisoara, Liliana Mercioiu Popa.

Therefore, the work proposes a reflexive dialog with the passers-by, by literally asking them a question and thus asking them to continue the artist’s discourse. In this way, the passers-by bring their contribution to completing the message. The work is also a call to cooperation for achieving any objective in a society that has become ever more egocentric.

From the point of view of the author, this work has the status of an *Ars Poetica*, stating her belief on the necessity and function of art in the contemporary society, talking at the same time about her own need to overcome certain stages and inner limits, of elevating her inspirational level, of finding coordinates for existing in this world.

Working both as a visual artist and as a landscape architect, Paula Hayes combines several means of expression, the use of plants being one of the most frequent. Well-known for the plant terrariums she
works on, in the installation for Madison Park in New York she also uses a set of polycarbonate globes of various sizes. Placed at variable heights, the globes house miniature landscape arrangements but also technological residues, pointing to the main theme of her creation, namely the connection with nature that people must not lose and the care required for maintaining micro- and macro-ecosystems. (3,4,5,8)

There are many other international artists who, like Hayes, pursue their professional activities right in the place where visual art meets landscaping, thus working in both fields: Alan Sonfist, Barbara Nemitz, Francesco Mariotti, Geer Poulis, Andreas Slominski, Stefan Banz etc. [2, 10]

Conclusion

The confluence of art with the multiple implications brought about by its getting out into the public space has expanded its possibilities of expression even more. At the same time, art goes one step forward into its dialogue with the audience, which is no longer only purely aesthetic but practical, utilitarian, socially quantifiable. Artists’ messages make us more receptive and more responsible in our relation with the environment.

A very important benefit gained by art following its interference with the surrounding environment, besides exploration of new environments, is the legitimization of the phenomenon opposite to getting art out into the street: bringing specific landscaping matter (plants, ground, rocks, water, etc.) as well as activities specific for the landscape architect (planting, transplanting, sowing, creating waterfalls and watercourses, creating micro- and macro-ecosystems, etc) inside the spaces destined for art, in galleries and museums.

Bibliography

2. Levin, K., Nemitz, Barbara, Herbstreuth, P., 2000, Transplant: Living Vegetation in Contemporary Art, Edited by Barbara Nemitz, Hatie Cantz Verlag;
4. Micheli, M., 1968, Avangarda Artistica a Sec. XX, Editura Meridiane, Bucuresti;
7. DAUER. SIMULTANEITÄT. ECHTZEIT, 2000, Kunstforum International, Bd. 151 Juli-September;
8. KÜNSTLER ALS GÄRTNER, 1999, Kunstforum International, Bd. 145 Mai-Juni, p. 113;

List of illustrations

2. Gary Riveschl, Live, living sculpture created out of a privet hedge, in 1976 (http://magazine.uc.edu/issues/0714/ArtSculpture.html)
9. Another artwork has found its location for display on an already existing architectural/landscaping project. Entitled What about you?, it was created in 2015 by an artist from Timisoara, Liliana Merciociu Popa.