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interReview Writings — *It's My Public Space*

“My 24”, “My News at 10”, or “My Home for the Hits” these are examples of a recent marketing angle for radio and television stations. As taglines go, these are not eloquent—slogans that ring both awkward and hollow. But never underestimate the power of an advertising budget. The “My” is here used, or abused, to strike a precarious balance between the highly individuated and the collective. And the ploy is more sophisticated than appears on the surface.

The audience member knows, obviously, they’re not the only one identifying with the programming as they enjoy their popcorn. This awareness of a larger context, even as they’re lulled by the flickering images, is not accidental. The reflexive terminology plays to the individual’s desire to be recognized as unique while also establishing the viewers as a self-selecting group. Marketing strategists understand, better than most, that human beings aspire both to be distinct and also fit in. Accordingly, advertisers have honed the art of appealing to the ego as well as the herd instinct of a prospective consumer. The “My” campaign cuts right to the heart of the ambiguity that pervades all things social, and in particular “public space”. Let’s not forget that media outlets are quasi-public entities: the airwaves belong to the people.

The idiosyncratic and the communal have a fickle relationship. Public space, whether a community-initiated green-space or a taxpayer funded plaza exists at the intersection of society’s many constituencies and opposing agendas. Dramatically stated, the town square is the meeting ground for social order. This symbolic position has evolved over time, dating back (at least) to when the town-square accommodated the exchange of news via a town crier. Yet it’s hard to know exactly what “public space” means. There is the underlying, but untenable, proposition that each and every person has an equal stake in one piece of ground. Taken literally, this translates as everyone having the ability to shape the place in question. Even in a community of three or four people, say college roommates, this utopist vision is impossible. Everyone does not have equal say in the make-up of our public space. Oversight for the public plaza is a top-down proposition; decisions are made by a few elected officials for the good of the many—or the supposed good of the many. So where does the individual fit in?

The common individual has, to put it bluntly, no ability to assert him or herself in the town square. Even the ancient tradition of orating from a soapbox is not going to be tolerated in today’s conformity-conscious, security-at-all-costs environment. But if we keep pulling apart the social fabric of a city, state, or country we eventually get to the roots of society—one person at a time.

The renowned sociologist William H. Whyte advocated for inclusive public spaces. Workers, students, people-watchers, street-performers, the destitute, and the rich, (my categorizations, not his) were to be equally welcomed. His methodical observations of public space fueled his belief that a mix of societal types made for the healthiest and most used public places, which promoted, by extension, a vigorous society. People are naturally attracted to public spaces that are heavily used—just as with a restaurant, you don’t want to go if there’s nobody there.

A Public Space borrows from artistic and sociological precedents to depict a way of looking at a place. The project resurrects the old cubist strategy of using multiple perspectives. In this case, the layering happens across a series of images rather than on a single page. But the effect is similar. Just as in historical cubism, there is interplay between perspectives, meaning is both added and subtracted, and the subject matter is simultaneously collapsed and expanded.

In a place that aspires to be many things for many different people, participants photograph whatever they find worthy of their attention. The images may interact well with one another or they may seem at odds. By using vocation as an indicator, the project includes both specialists and pedestrians, “pedestrian” meaning they have no professional connection to public space. Neither group is excluded. And thanks to the democratic medium of photography, neither group is privileged. This eclectic grouping of participants runs counter to society’s obsession for all things *expert*. *A Public Space* engages society at its bare essential, a handful of citizens looking at their communal real estate. Structurally, the project approximates—on a micro-level—the larger contingencies of real-world politics and social validation. As in the voting booth, participants make their mark while simultaneously being subsumed into the larger pool. It’s my public space, but consensus is unlikely.