

The Violence of Public Art: *Do the Right Thing*

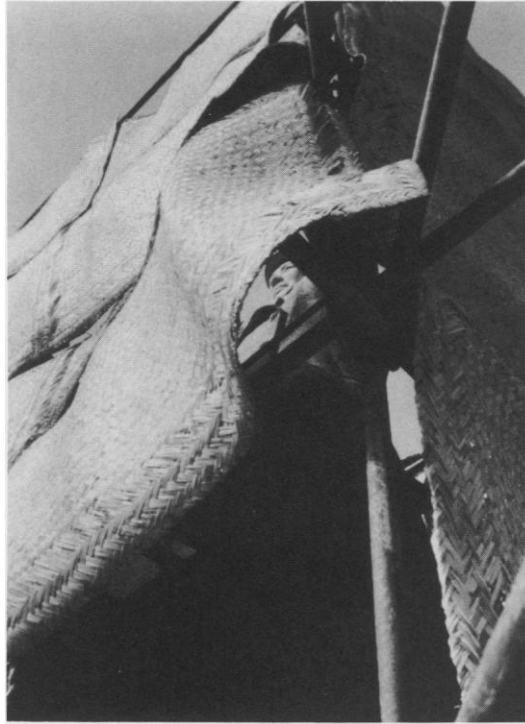
W. J. T. Mitchell

In May 1988, I took what may well be the last photograph of the statue of Mao Tse-tung on the campus of Beijing University. The thirty-foot-high monolith was enveloped in bamboo scaffolding “to keep off the harsh desert winds,” my hosts told me with knowing smiles. That night, workers with sledgehammers reduced the statue to a pile of rubble, and rumors spread throughout Beijing that the same thing was happening to statues of Mao on university campuses all over China. One year later, most of the world’s newspaper readers scanned the photos of Chinese students erecting a thirty-foot-high styrofoam and plaster “Goddess of Liberty” directly facing the disfigured portrait of Mao in Tiananmen Square despite the warnings from government loudspeakers: “This statue is illegal. It is not approved by the government. Even in the United States statues need permission before they can be put up.”¹ A few days later the newspaper accounts told us of army tanks mowing down this statue along with thousands of protesters, reasserting the rule of what was called law over a public and its art.

The Beijing Massacre, and the confrontation of images at the central public space in China, is full of instruction for anyone who

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1. Quoted in Uli Schmetzer, “Torch of China’s Lady Liberty Rekindles Fervor,” *Chicago Tribune*, 31 May 1989, sec. 1.



wants to think about public art and, more generally, about the whole relation of images, violence, and the public sphere.² "Even in the United States" political and legal control is exerted, not only over the erection of public statues and monuments but over the display of a wide range of images, artistic or otherwise, to actual or potential publics. Even in the United States the "publicness" of public images goes well beyond their specific sites or sponsorship: "publicity" has, in a very real sense, made all art into public art. And even in the United States, art that enters the public sphere is liable to be received as a provocation to or an act of violence.

Our own historical moment seems especially rich in examples of such public acts and provocations. Recent art has carried the scandals

2. For an excellent discussion of the way the events in China in June 1989 became a "spectacle for the West," overdetermined by the presence of a massive publicity apparatus, see Rey Chow, "Violence in the Other Country: Preliminary Remarks on the 'China Crisis,' June 1989," *Radical America* 22 (July-Aug. 1988): 23-32.

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previously associated with the cloistered spaces of the art world—the gallery, the museum, and the private collection—into the public sphere. And the public, by virtue of governmental patronage of the arts, has taken an interest in what is done with its money, no matter whether it is spent on traditional public art—in a public place as a public commission—or on a private activity in a private space that just happens to receive some public support or publicity. The controversy over Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* sculpture in a public plaza in New York City marks one boundary of this phenomenon. Serra's is a traditional work of public art; it provoked another engagement in what Michael North has called the "tiresome battle, repeated in city after city . . . whenever a piece of modern sculpture is installed outdoors."³ But now

3. Michael North, *The Final Sculpture: Public Monuments and Modern Poets* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1985), p. 17. *Tilted Arc* is "traditional" in its legal status as a commission by a public,

the battle has moved indoors, into the spaces of museums and art schools. The privacy of the exhibition site is no longer a protection for art that does symbolic violence to revered public figures like the deceased mayor of Chicago, or to public emblems and icons like the American flag or the crucifix.

The erosion of the boundary between public and private art is accompanied by a collapsing of the distinction between symbolic and actual violence, whether the "official" violence of police, juridical, or legislative power, or "unofficial" violence in the responses of private individuals. Serra's *Tilted Arc* was seen as a violation of public space, was subjected to actual defacement and vandalism by some members of the public, and became the subject of public legal proceedings to determine whether it should be dismantled.⁴ The official removal of an art student's caricature of Mayor Harold Washington from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago involved not just the damaging of the offensive picture but a claim that the picture was itself an "incitement to violence" in the black community. A later installation at the same school asking *What Is the Proper Way to Display the American Flag?* was construed as an invitation to "trample" on the flag. It immediately attracted threats of unofficial violence against the person of the artist and may ultimately serve as the catalyst not simply for legislative action but for a constitutional amendment protecting the flag against all acts of symbolic or real violence. The recent response to Andres Serrano's crucifix in a jar of urine and the closing of the Mapplethorpe show at the Corcoran Gallery indicate the presence of an American public, or at least of some well-entrenched political interests, that is fed up with tolerating symbolic violence against religious and sexual taboos under the covers of "art," "privacy," and "free speech," and is determined to fight back with the very real power of financial sanctions. We may not have tanks mowing down students and their statues, but we are experiencing a moment when art and the public (insofar as it is embodied by state power and "public opinion") seem on a collision course.

The association of public art with violence is nothing new. The fall of every Chinese dynasty since antiquity has been accompanied by the destruction of its public monuments, and the long history of political

governmental agency. In other ways (style, form, relation to site, public legibility) it is obviously nontraditional.

4. Serra described his intention "to dislocate or alter the decorative function" of the Federal Building plaza in an interview with Douglas Crimp ("Richard Serra's Urban Sculpture: An Interview," *Arts Magazine* 55 [Nov. 1980]: 118), but he rejected Crimp's suggestion that he was attempting to "block the conventional views" available in the plaza: "the intention is to bring the viewer into the sculpture. . . . After the piece is erected, the space will be understood primarily as a function of the sculpture." For an excellent account of this whole controversy and the ill-considered decision to remove *Tilted Arc*, see *Public Art, Public Controversy: The "Tilted Arc" on Trial*, ed. Sherrill Jordan et al. (New York, 1987).

and religious strife in the West could almost be rewritten as a history of iconoclasm. There is also nothing new about the opposition of art to its public. Artists have been biting the hands that feed them since antiquity,⁵ and even the notion of an “avant-garde” capable of scandalizing the bourgeoisie has been dismissed, by a number of critics, to the dustbin of history. The avant-garde, in Thomas Crow’s words, now functions “as a kind of research and development arm of the culture industry.”⁶ Oppositional movements such as surrealism, expressionism, and cubism have been recuperated for entertainment and advertising, and the boldest gestures of high modernism become the ornaments of corporate public spaces. If traditional public art identified certain classical styles as appropriate to the embodiment of public images, contemporary public art has turned to the monumental abstraction as its acceptable icon. What Kate Linker calls the “corporate bauble” in the shopping mall or bank plaza need have no iconic or symbolic relation to the public it serves, the space it occupies, or the figures it reveres.⁷ It is enough that it remain an emblem of aesthetic surplus, a token of “art” imported into and adding value to a public space.

The notorious “anti-aesthetic” posture of much postmodern art may be seen, in its flouting of the canons of high modernism, as the latest edition of the iconoclastic public icon, the image that affronts its own public—in this case, the art world as well as the “general” public. The violence associated with this art is inseparable from its *publicness*, especially its exploitation of and by the apparatuses of publicity, reproduction, and commercial distribution.⁸ The scandalousness and obtrusive theatricality of these images hold up a mirror to the nature of the commodified image, and the public spectator addressed by advertising, television, movies, and “Art” with a capital A. If all images are for sale, it’s hardly surprising that artists would invent public images that are difficult (in any sense) to “buy.” Postmodern art tries, among other things, to be difficult to own or collect, and much of it succeeds, existing only as ruined fragments or photographic “documentation.” Much

5. G. E. Lessing notes that beauty in visual art was not simply an aesthetic preference for the ancients but a matter of juridical control. The Greeks had laws against caricature, and the ugly “dirt painters” were subjected to censorship. See Lessing’s *Laocoon: An Essay upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, trans. Ellen Frothingham (1766; New York, 1969), pp. 9–10.

6. Thomas Crow, “Modernism and Mass Culture in the Visual Arts,” in *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, ed. Francis Frascina (New York, 1985), p. 257.

7. See Kate Linker’s important essay, “Public Sculpture: The Pursuit of the Pleasurable and Profitable Paradise,” *Artforum* 19 (Mar. 1981): 66.

8. Scott Burton summarizes the “new kind of relationship” between art and its audience: “it might be called public art. Not because it is necessarily located in public places, but because the content is more than the private history of the maker” (quoted in Henry M. Sayre, *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde since 1970* [Chicago, 1989], p. 6).

of it also "fails," of course, to be unmarketable and thus "succeeds" quite handsomely as an aesthetic commodity, as Andy Warhol's work demonstrates. The common thread of both the marketable and the unmarketable art work is the more or less explicit awareness of "marketability" and publicity as unavoidable dimensions of any public sphere that art might address. "Co-optation" and "resistance" are thus the ethical-political maxims of this public sphere and the aesthetic it generates.

The violence associated with this art may seem, then, to have a peculiarly desperate character and is often directed at the work itself as much as its beholder. Sometimes a self-destructive violence is built into the work, as in Jean Tinguely's self-destroying machine sculpture, *Homage to New York*, or Rudolf Schwarzkogler's amputation of his own penis, both of which now exist only in photographic documentation.⁹ More often, the violence suffered by contemporary art seems simultaneously fateful and accidental, a combination of misunderstanding by local or partial publics and a certain fragility or temporariness in the work itself. The early history of Claes Oldenburg's monumental *Lipstick* at Yale University is one of progressive disfigurement and dismantling. Many of the works of Robert Smithson and Robert Morris are destroyed, existing now only in documents and photographs. The openness of contemporary art to publicity and public destruction has been interpreted by some commentators as a kind of artistic aggression and scandalmongering. A more accurate reading would recognize it as a deliberate vulnerability to violence, a strategy for dramatizing new relations between the traditionally "timeless" work of art and the transient generations, the "publics," that are addressed by it.¹⁰ The defaced and graffiti-laden walls that Jonathan Borofsky installs in museum spaces are a strategy for reconfiguring the whole relation of private and public, legitimate and "transgressive" exhibition spaces. Morris's 1981 proposal to install the casings of nuclear bombs as monumental sculpture at a Florida VA hospital was both a logical extension of a public sculpture tradition (the public display of obsolete weapons) and a deadpan mimicry of the claim that these weapons "saved American lives" in World War II.¹¹

The question naturally arises: Is public art inherently violent, or is it a provocation to violence? Is violence built into the monument in its

9. See Sayre, *The Object of Performance*, pp. 2–3.

10. For a shocking example of an artist's misrepresentation of these issues, see Frederick E. Hart, "The Shocking Truth about Contemporary Art," *The Washington Post*, 28 Aug.–3 Sept. 1989, national weekly edition, op-ed. sec. It hardly comes as a surprise that Hart is the sculptor responsible for the figural "supplement" to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the traditional monumental figures of three soldiers erected in the area above and behind the memorial.

11. See Robert Morris, "Fissures," unpublished manuscript.

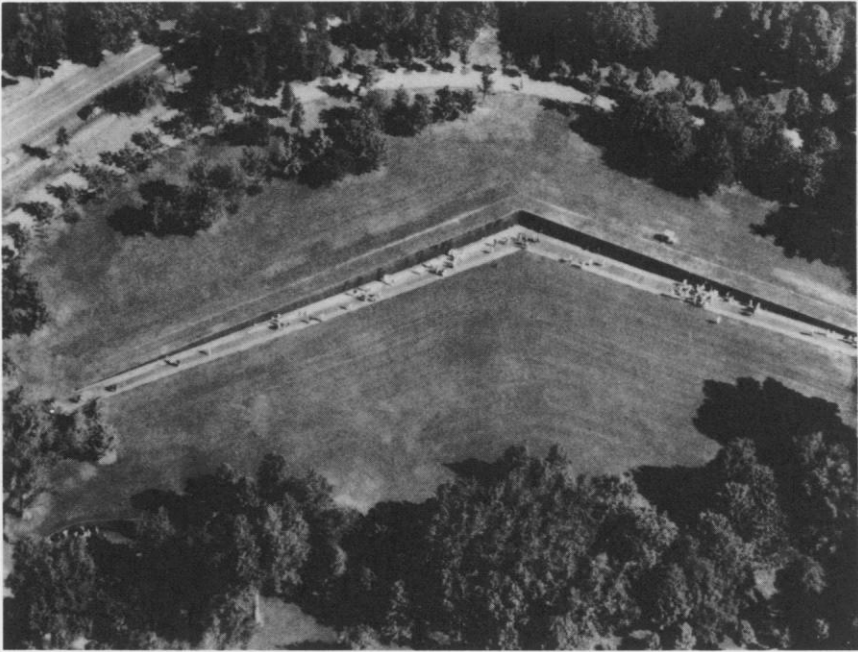
very conception? Or is violence simply an accident that befalls some monuments, a matter of the fortunes of history? The historical record suggests that if violence is simply an accident that happens to public art, it is one that is always waiting to happen. The principal media and materials of public art are stone and metal sculpture not so much by choice as by necessity. "A public sculpture," says Lawrence Alloway, "should be invulnerable or inaccessible. It should have the material strength to resist attack or be easily cleanable, but it also needs a formal structure that is not wrecked by alterations."¹² The violence that surrounds public art is more, however, than simply the ever-present possibility of accident—the natural disaster or random act of vandalism. Much of the world's public art—memorials, monuments, triumphal arches, obelisks, columns, and statues—has a rather direct reference to violence in the form of war or conquest. From Ozymandias to Caesar to Napoleon to Hitler, public art has served as a kind of monumentalizing of violence, and never more powerfully than when it presents the conqueror as a man of peace, imposing a Napoleonic code or a *pax Romana* on the world. Public sculpture that is too frank or explicit about this monumentalizing of violence, whether the Assyrian palace reliefs of the ninth century B.C., or Morris's bomb sculpture proposal of 1981, is likely to offend the sensibilities of a public committed to the repression of its own complicity in violence.¹³ The very notion of public art as we receive it is inseparable from what Jürgen Habermas has called "the liberal model of the public sphere," a dimension distinct from the economic, the private, and the political. This ideal realm provides the space in which disinterested citizens may contemplate a transparent emblem of their own inclusiveness and solidarity, and deliberate on the general good, free of coercion, violence, or private interests.¹⁴

The fictional ideal of the classic public sphere is that it includes everyone; the fact is that it can be constituted only by the rigorous exclusion of certain groups—slaves, children, foreigners, those without property, and (most conspicuously) women. The very notion of the

12. Lawrence Alloway, "The Public Sculpture Problem," *Studio International* 184 (Oct. 1972): 124.

13. See Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, "The Forms of Violence," *October*, no. 8 (Spring 1979): 17–29, for an important critique of the "narrativization" of violence in Western art and an examination of the alternative suggested by the Assyrian palace reliefs.

14. Habermas first introduced this concept in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass., 1989). First published in 1962, it has since become the focus of an extensive literature. See also Habermas's short encyclopedia article, "The Public Sphere," trans. Sara Lennox and Frank Lennox, *New German Critique* 1 (Fall 1974): 49–55, and the introduction to it by Peter Hohendahl in the same issue, pp. 45–48. I owe much to the guidance of Miriam Hansen and Lauren Berlant on this complex and crucial topic.



Aerial view of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Photo: Richard Hofmeister, Smithsonian Institution's Office of Printing and Photographic Services. From *Reflections on the Wall: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial* (Harrisburg, Pa., 1987).

"public," it seems, grows out of a conflation of two quite different Latin words, *populus* (the people) and *pubes* (adult men). The word *public* might more properly be written with the *l* in parentheses to remind us that for much of human history political and social authority has derived from a "pubic" sphere, not a public one.¹⁵ This seems to be the case even when the public sphere is personified as a female figure. The famous examples of female monuments to the all-inclusive principle of public civility and rule of law—Athena to represent impartial Athenian justice, the Goddess of Reason epitomizing the rationalization of the public sphere in revolutionary France, the Statue of Liberty welcoming the huddled masses from every shore—all presided over political systems that rigorously excluded women from any public role.¹⁶

Perhaps some of the power associated with the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., comes from its cunning violation and

15. See Joan Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1988), p. 13.

16. Chow notes the way the "Goddess of Liberty" in Tiananmen Square replicates the "'King Kong syndrome,'" in which the body of the white woman sutures the gap between "enlightened instrumental reason and barbarism-lurking-behind-the Wall," the "white man's production and the monster's destruction" (Chow, "Violence in the Other Country," p. 26).

inversion of monumental conventions for expressing and repressing the violence of the pub(l)ic sphere. The VVM is antiheroic, antimonumental, a V-shaped gash or scar, a trace of violence suffered, not of violence wielded in the service of a glorious cause (as in the conventional war memorial).¹⁷ It achieves the universality of the public monument not by rising above its surroundings to transcend the political but by going beneath the political to the shared sense of a wound that will never heal, or (more optimistically) a scar that will never fade. Its legibility is not that of narrative: no heroic episode such as the planting of the American flag on Iwo Jima is memorialized, only the mind-numbing and undifferentiated chronology of violence and death catalogued by the fifty-eight thousand names inscribed on the black marble walls. The only other legibility is that of the giant flat *V* carved in the earth itself, a multivalent monogram or initial that seems uncannily overdetermined. Does the *V* stand for Vietnam? For a Pyrrhic "Victory"? For the Veterans themselves? For the Violence they suffered? Is it possible, finally, to avoid seeing it as a quite literal antitype to the "pubic sphere" signified in the traditional phallic monument, that is, as the Vagina of Mother Earth opened to receive her sons, as if the American soil were opening its legs to show the scars inscribed on her private parts? Even the authorship of this polysemous and thoroughly feminized monument seems overdetermined in retrospect. Who would have predicted that the national trauma of the United States' catastrophic adventure in the Far East would be memorialized in a design by a twenty-one-year-old Asian woman?¹⁸

It should be clear that the violence associated with public art is not simply an undifferentiated abstraction, any more than is the public sphere it addresses. Violence may be in some sense "encoded" in the concept and practice of public art, but the specific role it plays, its political or ethical status, the form in which it is manifested, the identities of those who wield and suffer it, is always nested in particular circumstances. We may distinguish three basic forms of violence in the images of public art, each of which may, in various ways, interact with the other: (1) the image as an *act* or *object* of violence, itself doing violence to beholders, or "suffering" violence as the target of vandalism, disfigurement, or demolition; (2) the image as a *weapon* of violence, a device for attack, coercion, incitement, or more subtle "dislocations" of public spaces; (3) the image as a *representation* of violence, whether a realistic

17. See Charles L. Griswold, "The Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Washington Mall: Philosophical Thoughts on Political Iconography," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (Summer 1986): 709. Griswold reads the VVM as a symbol of "honor without glory."

18. Maya Lin, then a twenty-one-year-old Yale University architecture student, submitted the winning design in what may have been the largest competition for a work of public art ever held: 1,421 designs were entered.

imitation of a violent act, or a monument, trophy, memorial, or other trace of past violence. All three forms are, in principle, independent of one another: an image can be a weapon of violence without representing it; it may become the object of violence without ever being used as a weapon; it may represent violence without ever exerting or suffering it. In fact, however, these three forms of violence are often linked together. Pornography is said to be a representation of and a weapon of violence against women, which should be destroyed or at least banned from public distribution.¹⁹ The propaganda image is a weapon of war that obviously engages with all three forms of violence in various ways, depending on the circumstances. The relation of pornography to propaganda is a kind of allegory for the relation of "private" to "public" art: the former projects fetishistic images that are confined, in theory, to the "private sphere" of sexuality; the latter projects totemistic or idolatrous images that are directed, in theory, at a specific public sphere.²⁰ In practice, however, private "arousal" and public "mobilization" cannot be confined to their proper spheres: rape and riot are the "surplus" of the economy of violence encoded in public and private images.

These elisions of the boundary between public and private images are what make it possible, perhaps even necessary, to turn from the sphere of public art in its "proper" or traditional sense (works of art installed in public places by public agencies at public expense) to film, a medium of public art in an extended or "improper" sense. Although film is sometimes called the central public art of the twentieth century, we should be clear about the adjustments in both key terms—"public" and "art"—required to make this turn. Film is not a "public art" in the classical sense stipulated by Habermas; it is deeply entangled with the marketplace and the sphere of commercial-industrial publicity that replaces what Habermas calls the "culture-debating" public with a "culture-consuming" public. We need not accept Habermas's historical claim that the classic public sphere (based in the "world of letters") was "replaced by the pseudo-public or sham-private world of culture consumption"²¹ to see that its basic distinction between an ideal, utopian public sphere and the real world of commerce and publicity is what underwrites the distinction between public art "proper" and the "improper" turn to film, a medium that is neither "public" nor "art" in this proper (utopian) sense.

19. See Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law* (Cambridge, Mass., 1987), esp. pp. 172–73, 192–93.

20. For more on the distinction between totemism and fetishism, see my "Tableau and Taboo: The Resistance to Vision in Literary Discourse," *CEA Critic* 51 (Fall 1988): 4–10.

21. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, p. 160.

This juxtaposition of public art and commercial film illuminates a number of contrasting features whose distinctiveness is under considerable pressure, both in contemporary art and recent film practice. An obvious difference between public art and the movies is the contrast in mobility. Of all forms of art, public art is the most static, stable, and fixed in space: the monument is a fixed, generally rigid object, designed to remain on its site for all time.²² The movies, by contrast, “move” in every possible way—in their presentation, their circulation and distribution, and in their responsiveness to the fluctuations of contemporary taste. Public art is supposed to occupy a pacified, utopian space, a site held in common by free and equal citizens whose debates, freed of commercial motives, private interest, or violent coercion, will form “public opinion.” Movies are beheld in private, commercial theatres that further privatize spectators by isolating and immobilizing them in darkness. Public art stands still and silent while its beholders move in the reciprocal social relations of festivals, mass meetings, parades, and rendezvous. Movies appropriate all motion and sound to themselves, allowing only the furtive, private rendezvous of lovers or of autoeroticism.

The most dramatic contrast between film and public art emerges in the characteristic tendencies of each medium with respect to the representation of sex and violence. Public art tends to repress violence, veiling it with the stasis of monumentalized and pacified spaces, just as it veils gender inequality by representing the masculine public sphere with the monumentalized bodies of women. Film tends to express violence, staging it as a climactic spectacle, just as it foregrounds gender inequality by fetishizing rather than monumentalizing the female body. Sex and violence are strictly forbidden in the public site, and thus the plaza, common, or city square is the favored site for insurrection and symbolic transgression, with disfiguration of the monument a familiar, almost ritual occurrence.²³ The representation of sex and violence is licensed in the cinema, and it is generally presumed (even by the censors) that it is reenacted elsewhere—in streets, alleys, and private places.

I have rehearsed these traditional distinctions between film and public art not to claim their irresistible truth but to sketch the conven-

22. The removal of *Tilted Arc* is all the more remarkable (and ominous) in view of this strong presumption in favor of permanence.

23. The fate of the Berlin Wall is a perfect illustration of this process of disfiguration as a transformation of a public monument into a host of private fetishes. While the Wall stood it served as a work of public art, both in its official status and its unofficial function as a blank slate for the expression of public resistance. As it is torn to pieces, its fragments are carried away to serve as trophies in private collections. As German reunification proceeds, these fragments may come to signify a nostalgia for the monument that expressed and enforced its division.

tional background against which the relations of certain contemporary practices in film and public art may be understood—their common horizon of resistance, as it were. Much recent public art obviously resists and criticizes its own site and the fixed, monumental status conventionally required of it; much of it aspires, quite literally, to the condition of film in the form of photographic or cinematic documentation. I turn now to a film that aspires to the condition of public art, attempting a similar form of resistance within its own medium, and holding up a mirror to the economy of violence encoded in public images.²⁴

In May 1989 I tried unsuccessfully to attend an advance screening of Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* at the University of Chicago. People from the university and its neighborhood had lined up for six hours to get the free tickets, and none of them seemed interested in scalping them at any price. Spike Lee made an appearance at the film's conclusion and stayed until well after midnight answering the questions of the overflow crowd. This event turned out to be a preview not simply of the film but of the film's subsequent reception. Lee spent much of the summer answering questions about the film in television and newspaper interviews; the *New York Times* staged an instant symposium of experts on ethnicity and urban violence; and screenings of the film (especially in urban theatres) took on the character of festivals, with audiences in New York, London, Chicago, and Los Angeles shouting out their approval to the screen and to each other.

The film elicited disapproval from critics and viewers as well. It was denounced as an incitement to violence and even as an *act* of violence by viewers who regarded its representations of ghetto characters as demeaning.²⁵ The film moved from the familiar commercial public sphere of "culture consumption" into the sphere of public art, the arena of the "culture-debating" public, a shift signalled most dramati-

24. By the phrase "economy of violence," I mean, quite strictly, a social structure in which violence circulates and is exchanged as a currency of social interaction. The "trading" of insults might be called the barter or "in kind" exchange; body parts (eyes, teeth notably) can also be exchanged, along with blows, glares, hard looks, threats, and first strikes. This economy lends itself to rapid, runaway inflation, so that (under the right circumstances) an injury that would have been trivial (stepping on someone's sneakers, smashing a radio) is drastically overestimated in importance. As a currency, violence is notoriously and appropriately unstable.

25. Murray Kempton's review ("The Pizza Is Burning!") *New York Review of Books*, 28 Sept. 1989, pp. 37–38), is perhaps the most hysterically abusive of the hostile reviews. Kempton condemns Spike Lee as a "hack" who is ignorant of African-American history and guilty of "a low opinion of his own people" (p. 37). His judgment of Mookie, the character played by Lee in the film, is even more vitriolic: Mookie "is not just an inferior specimen of a great race but beneath the decent minimum for humankind itself" (p. 37).



cally by its exclusion from the “Best Picture” category of the Academy Awards. As the film’s early reception subsides into the cultural history of the late eighties in the United States, we may now be in a position to assess its significance as something more than a “public sensation” or “popular phenomenon.” *Do the Right Thing* is rapidly establishing itself not only as a work of public art (a “monumental achievement” in the trade lingo), but as a film *about* public art. The film tells a story of multiple ethnic public spheres, the violence that circulates among and within these partial publics, and the tendency of this violence to fixate itself on specific images—symbolic objects, fetishes, and public icons or idols.

The specific public image at the center of the violence in *Do the Right Thing* is a collection of photographs, an array of signed publicity photos of Italian-American stars in sports, movies, and popular music framed and hung up on the “Wall of Fame” in Sal’s Famous Pizzeria at the corner of Stuyvesant and Lexington in Brooklyn. A bespectacled b-boy and would-be political activist named Buggin’ Out challenges this arrangement, asking Sal why no pictures of African-Americans are on the Wall. Sal’s response is an appeal to the rights of private property: “You want brothers up on the Wall of Fame, you open up your own business, then you can do what you wanna do. My pizzeria, Italian-Americans only up on the wall.” When Buggin’ Out persists, arguing that blacks should have some say about the Wall since their money keeps the pizzeria in business, Sal reaches for an all-too-familiar emblem of both the American way of life and of racial violence: his baseball bat. Mookie, Sal’s black delivery boy (played by Lee) defuses

the situation by hustling Buggin' Out out of the pizzeria. In retaliation, Buggin' Out tries, quite unsuccessfully, to organize a neighborhood boycott, and the conflict between the black public and the white-owned private business simmers on the back burner throughout the hot summer day. Smiley, a stammering, semi-articulate black man who sells copies of a unique photograph showing Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X together, tries to sell his photos to Sal (who seems ready to be accommodating) but is driven off by Sal's son Pino. Sal is assaulted by another form of "public art" when Radio Raheem enters the pizzeria with his boom-box blasting out Public Enemy's rap song, "Fight the Power." Finally, at closing time, Radio Raheem and Buggin' Out reenter Sal's, radio blasting, to demand once again that some black people go up on the Wall of Fame. Sal smashes the radio with his baseball bat, Raheem pulls Sal over the counter and begins to choke him. In the melee that follows, the police kill Radio Raheem and depart with his body, leaving Sal and his sons to face a neighborhood that has become a mob. Mookie throws a garbage can through the window of the pizzeria, and the mob loots and burns it. Later, when the fire is burning down, Smiley enters the ruins and pins his photograph of King and Malcolm to the smoldering Wall of Fame.

Sal's Wall of Fame exemplifies the central contradictions of public art. It is located in a place that may be described, with equal force, as a public accommodation and a private business. Like the classic liberal public sphere, it rests on a foundation of private property that comes



Buggin' Out looks up at the Wall of Fame.

into the open when its public inclusiveness is challenged. Sal's repeated refrain throughout the film to express both his openness and hospitality to the public and his "right" to reign as a despot in his "own place" is a simple definition of what his "place" is: "This is America." As "art," Sal's Wall stands on the threshold between the aesthetic and the rhetorical, functioning simultaneously as ornament and as propaganda, both a private collection and a public statement. The content of the statement occupies a similar threshold, the hyphenated space designated by "Italian-American," a hybrid of particular ethnic identification and general public identity. The Wall is important to Sal not just because it displays famous Italians but because they are famous *Americans* (Frank Sinatra, Joe DiMaggio, Liza Minelli, Mario Cuomo) who have made it possible for Italians to think of themselves as Americans, full-fledged members of the general public sphere. The Wall is important to Buggin' Out because it signifies exclusion from the public sphere. This may seem odd, since the neighborhood is filled with public representations of African-American heroes on every side: a huge billboard of Mike Tyson looms over Sal's pizzeria; children's art ornaments the sidewalks and graffiti streaks subversive messages like "Tawana told the Truth" on the walls; Magic Johnson T-shirts, Air Jordan sneakers, and a variety of jewelry and exotic hairdos make the characters like walking billboards for "black pride"; and the sound-world of the film is suffused with a musical "Wall of Fame," a veritable anthology of great jazz, blues, and popular music emanating from Mister Señor Love Daddy's storefront radio station, just two doors away from Sal's.

Why aren't these tokens of black self-respect enough for Buggin' Out? The answer, I think, is that they are only tokens of self-respect, of black pride, and what Buggin' Out wants is the respect of whites, the acknowledgment that African-Americans are hyphenated Americans, too, just like Italians.²⁶ The public spaces accessible to blacks are *only* public, and that only in the special way that the sphere of commercial-industrial publicity (a sphere that includes, by the way, movies themselves) is available to blacks. They are, like the public spaces in which black athletes and entertainers appear, rarely owned by blacks themselves; they are reminders that black public figures are by and large the "property" of a white-owned corporation—whether a professional sports franchise, a recording company, or a film distributor. The public spaces in which blacks achieve prominence are thus only sites of publicity, or of marginalized arts of resistance epitomized by graffiti, not of a genuine public sphere they may enter as equal citizens. These spaces, despite their glamour and magnitude, are not as important as the humble little piece of "real America" that is Sal's Pizzeria, the semi-

26. I am indebted to Joel Snyder for suggesting this distinction between self-respect and acknowledgment.

private, semi-public white-owned space, the threshold space that supports genuine membership in the American public sphere. The one piece of public art "proper" that appears in the film is an allegorical mural across the street from Sal's, and it is conspicuously marginalized; the camera never lingers on it long enough to allow decipherment of its complex images. The mural is a kind of archaic residue of a past moment in the black struggle for equality, when black pride was enough. In *Do the Right Thing* the blacks have plenty of pride; what they want, and cannot get, is the acknowledgment and respect of whites.

The film is not suggesting, however, that integrating the Wall of Fame would solve the problem of racism or allow African-Americans to enter the public sphere as full-fledged Americans. Probably the most fundamental contradiction the film suggests about the whole issue of public art is its simultaneous triviality and monumentality. The Wall of Fame is, in a precise sense, the "cause" of the major violence in the narrative, and yet it is also merely a token or symptom. Buggin' Out's boycott fails to draw any support from the neighborhood, which generally regards his plan as a meaningless gesture. The racial integration of the public symbol, as of the public accommodation, is merely a token of public acceptance. Real participation in the public sphere involves more than tokenism: it involves full economic participation. As long as blacks do not own private property in this society, they remain in something like the status of public art, mere ornaments to the public place, entertaining statues and abstract caricatures rather than full human beings.

Spike Lee has been accused by some critics of racism for projecting a world of black stereotypes in his film: Tina, the tough, foul-mouthed sexy ghetto "babe"; Radio Raheem, the sullen menace with his ghetto blaster; Da Mayor, the neighborhood wino; Mother Sister, the domineering, disapproving matriarch who sits in her window all day posed like Whistler's mother. Lee even casts himself as a type: a streetwise, lazy, treacherous hustler who hoards his money, neglects his child, and betrays his employer by setting off the mob to destroy the pizzeria. But it is not enough to call these stereotypes "unrealistic"; they are, from another point of view, highly realistic representations of the public *images* of blacks, the caricatures imposed on them and acted out by them. Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis, whom Lee cast as the Matriarch and the Wino, have a long history of participation in the film proliferation of these images, and Dee's comment on the role of black elders is quite self-conscious about this history: "'When you get old in this country, you become a statue, a monument. And what happens to statues? Birds shit on them. There's got to be more to life for an elder than that.'" ²⁷ The film suggests that there's got to be more to life for the younger

27. Quoted in Spike Lee and Lisa Jones, *Do the Right Thing: A Spike Lee Joint* (New York, 1989), caption to pl. 30.

generation as well, which seems equally in danger of being smothered by the straitjacket of stereotypes. It is as if the film wanted to cast its characters as public statues with human beings imprisoned inside them, struggling to break out of their shells to truly participate in the public space where they are displayed.

This "breaking out" of the public image is what the film dramatizes and what constitutes the violence that pervades it. Much of this violence is merely trivial or irritating, involving the tokens of public display, as when an Irish-American yuppie homesteader steps on Buggin' Out's Air Jordans; some is erotic, as in Tina's dance as a female boxer, which opens the film; some is subtle and poetic, as in the scene when Radio Raheem breaks out of his sullen silence, turns off his blaster, and does a rap directly addressed to the camera, punctuating his lines with punches, his fists clad in massive gold rings that are inscribed with the words LOVE and HATE. Negative reactions to the film tend to focus obsessively on the destruction of the pizzeria, as if the violence against property were the only "real" violence in the film. Radio Raheem's death is regularly passed over as a mere link in the narrative chain that leads to the climactic spectacle of the burning pizzeria. Lee has also been criticized for showing this spectacle at all; the film has routinely been denounced as an incitement to violence, or at least a defense of rioting against white property as an act of justifiable violence in the black community. Commentators have complained that the riot is insufficiently motivated, or that it is just there for the spectacle, or to prove a thesis.²⁸ In particular, Lee has been criticized for allowing Mookie's character to "break out" of its passive, evasive, uncommitted stance at the crucial moment, when he throws the garbage can through the window.

Mookie's act dramatizes the whole issue of violence and public art by staging an act of vandalism against a public symbol, and specifically by smashing the plate-glass window that marks the boundary between public and private property, the street and the commercial interest.

28. Terrence Rafferty ("Open and Shut," review of *Do the Right Thing*, *The New Yorker*, 24 July 1989, pp. 78–81) makes all three complaints: Rafferty (1) reduces the film to a thesis about "the inevitability of race conflict in America"; (2) suggests that the violent ending comes only from "Lee's sense, as a filmmaker, that he needs a conflagration at the end"; and (3) compares Lee's film unfavorably to Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets* and *Taxi Driver*, where "the final bursts of violence are generated entirely from within." What Rafferty fails to consider is (1) that the film explicitly articulates theses that are diametrically opposed to his reductive reading (most notably, Love Daddy's concluding call "my people, my people," for peace and harmony, a speech filled with echoes of Zora Neale Hurston's autobiography); (2) that the final conflagration might be deliberately staged as a *stagey*, *theatrical event* to foreground a certain "requirement" of the medium; (3) that the psychological conventions of Italian-American neorealism with their "inner" motivations for violence are precisely what is in question in *Do the Right Thing*.

Most of the negative commentary on the film has construed this action as a political statement, a call by Spike Lee to advance African-American interests by trashing white-owned businesses. Lee risks this misinterpretation, of course, in the very act of staging this spectacle for potential monumentalization as a public statement, a clearly legible image readable by all potential publics as a threat or model for imitation. But the fact that this event has emerged as the focus of principal controversy suggests that it is not so legible, not so transparent as it might have seemed. Spike Lee's motives as writer and director—whether to make a political statement, give the audience the spectacle it wants, or fulfill a narrative design—are far from clear. And Mookie's motivation as a character is equally problematic: at the very least, his action seems subject to multiple private determinations—anger at Sal, frustration at his dead-end job, rage at Radio Raheem's murder—that have no political or “public” content. At the most intimate level, Mookie's act hints at the anxieties about sexual violence that we have seen encoded in other public monuments. Sal has, in Mookie's view, attempted to seduce his beloved sister (whom we have seen in a nearly incestuous relation to Mookie in an opening scene), and Mookie has warned his sister never to enter the pizzeria again (this dialogue staged in front of the pizzeria's brick wall, spray-painted with the graffiti message, “Tawana told the Truth,” an evocation of another indecipherable case of highly publicized sexual violence). Mookie's private anxieties about his manhood (“Be a man, Mookie!” is his girlfriend Tina's hectoring refrain) are deeply inscribed in his public act of violence against the public symbol of white domination.

But private, psychological explanations do not exhaust the meaning of Mookie's act. An equally compelling account would regard the smashing of the window as an ethical intervention. At the moment of Mookie's decision the mob is wavering between attacking the pizzeria and assaulting its Italian-American owners. Mookie's act directs the violence away from persons and toward property, the only choice available in that moment. Mookie “does the right thing,” saving human lives by sacrificing property.²⁹ Most fundamentally, however, we have to say that Lee himself “does the right thing” in this moment by breaking the illusion of cinematic realism and intervening as the director of his own

29. This interpretation was first suggested to me by Arnold Davidson, who heard it from David Wellbery of the department of comparative literature at Stanford University. It received independent confirmation from audiences to this paper at Harvard, California Institute of the Arts, Williams College, University of Southern California, UCLA, Pasadena Art Center, the University of Chicago's American Studies Workshop, the Chicago Art History Colloquium, and Sculpture Chicago's conference. I wish to thank the participants in these discussions for their many provocative questions and suggestions.

work of public art, taking personal responsibility for the decision to portray and perform a public act of violence against private property. This choice breaks the film loose from the *narrative* justification of violence, its legitimation by a law of cause and effect or political justice, and displays it as a pure effect of *this* work of art in this moment and place. The act makes perfect sense as a piece of Brechtian theater, giving the audience what it wants with one hand and taking it back with the other.

We may call *Do the Right Thing* a piece of “violent public art,” then, in all the relevant senses—as a representation, an act, and a weapon of violence. But it is a work of *intelligent* violence, to echo the words of Malcolm X that conclude the film. It does not repudiate the alternative of nonviolence articulated by Martin Luther King in the film’s other epigraph (this is, after all, a film, a symbolic and not a “real” act of violence); it resituates both violence and nonviolence as strategies within a struggle that is simply an ineradicable fact of American public life. The film may be suffused in violence, but unlike the “black Rambo” films that find such ready acceptance with the American public, it takes the trouble to differentiate this violence with ethically and aesthetically precise images. The film exerts a violence on its viewers, badgering us to “fight the power” and “do the right thing,” but it never underestimates the difficulty of rightly locating the power to be fought, or the right strategy for fighting it. A prefabricated propaganda image of political or ethical correctness, a public monument to “legitimate violence” is exactly what the film refuses to be. It is, rather, a monument of resistance, of “intelligent violence,” a ready-made assemblage of images that reconfigures a local space—literally, the space of the black ghetto, figuratively, the space of public images of race in the American public sphere. Like the Goddess of Liberty in Tiananmen Square, the film confronts the disfigured public image of legitimate power, holding out the torch of liberty with two hands, one inscribed with HATE, the other with LOVE.

If *Do the Right Thing* has a moral for those who wish to continue the tradition of public art and public sculpture as a utopian venture, a “daring to dream” of a more humane and comprehensive public sphere, it is probably in the opening lines of the film, uttered by the ubiquitous voice of Love Daddy: “Wake up!” Public art has always dared to dream, projecting fantasies of a monolithic, uniform, pacified public sphere. What seems called for now, and what many of our contemporary artists wish to provide, is a *critical* public art that is frank about the contradictions and violence encoded in its own situation, one that dares to awaken a public sphere of resistance, struggle, and dialogue. Exactly how to negotiate the border between struggle and dialogue, between the argument of force and the force of argument, is an open question.



"It resituates both violence and nonviolence as strategies within a struggle that is simply an ineradicable fact of American public life."

Violence as a way of achieving racial justice is both impractical and immoral. It is impractical because it is a descending spiral ending in destruction for all. The old law of an eye for an eye leaves everybody blind. It is immoral because it seeks to humiliate the opponent rather than win his understanding; it seeks to annihilate rather than to convert. Violence is immoral because it thrives on hatred rather than love. It destroys community and makes brotherhood impossible. It leaves society in monologue rather than dialogue. Violence ends by defeating itself. It creates bitterness in the survivors and brutality in the destroyers. [Martin Luther King, Jr., "Where Do We Go from Here?" *Stride toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (New York, 1958), p. 213]

I think there are plenty of good people in America, but there are also plenty of bad people in America and the bad ones are the ones who seem to have all the power and be in these positions to block things that you and I need. Because this is the situation, you and I have to preserve the right to do what is necessary to bring an end to that situation, and it doesn't mean that I advocate violence, but at the same time I am not against using violence in self-defense. I don't even call it violence when it's self-defense, I call it intelligence. [Malcolm X, "Communication and Reality," *Malcolm X: The Man and His Times*, ed. John Henrik Clarke (New York, 1969), p. 313]