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# FUSE

MAGAZINE

**CONTEMPORARY  
ARTISTS,  
LEGAL WRANGLING,  
& THE MCMICHAEL  
CANADIAN ART COLLECTION**

**Plus... a profile of Ingrid Bachmann,  
artists' pages by Buseje, Arthur Renwick  
and Stephen Andrews**

Reviews of "Rencontre Performance," Lyle Ashton Harris, Kit,  
*The Fact of Blackness and Evictions*



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# PUBLIC ART AND HOMELESSNESS

## Behind the Space Industry

REVIEW OF *EVICIONS: ART AND SPATIAL POLITICS*  
BY ROSALYN DEUTSCHE  
CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS: MIT PRESS, 1996

REVIEW BY GORDON BRENT INGRAM

There is a booming "space industry" at the junctures of cultural and gender studies, geography and "new genre" public art that is increasingly active in redesigning the places in which we live.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, too much public art is being used as window dressing to obscure the effective privatization of public places, especially with the increasing globalization of real estate markets. *Evictions* is a jarring meditation on how too much of contemporary art, even socially oriented public art, functions to privatize and to make spaces less democratic. Rosalyn Deutsche outlines a renewed radicalism and brilliantly relates "evictions" to both the art world, gentrification and mass homelessness in the 1980s. She highlights the persistence of old left conceptions of "the public" and "the private" to remain complacent to the "eviction of feminist critiques from the artistic public sphere." (p. 24) A decade ago, arguing that the increasing number of redeveloped spaces is directly related to a rise in homelessness in New York might have been considered paranoid. But, today these arguments may well be the last word in the art and gentrification debates of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Deutsche sees the scapegoating of homeless people as symptomatic of the pathologies of today's city living.

*Evictions* is a scathing critique that shifts recent arguments about the effective removal of large portions of "the public" from public art to a kind of manifesto for renewed activism. Few people involved in municipally sanctioned and corporate

public projects are spared, especially the liberal art world and smug leftist cultural theorists. The book is largely a defense of "the democratic potential of site-specificity" (p. 16) — especially of site-specific and public art against its defusion and depoliticization as it has become institutionalized in city governments.

ratizing potentials of a decade of post-modern theory have been constrained by "rejection of issues of sexuality and gender and their marginalization of feminist social analysis." (p. 19) Part of the problem that Deutsche identifies is that older left analyses have equated public space with political space, continuing to push



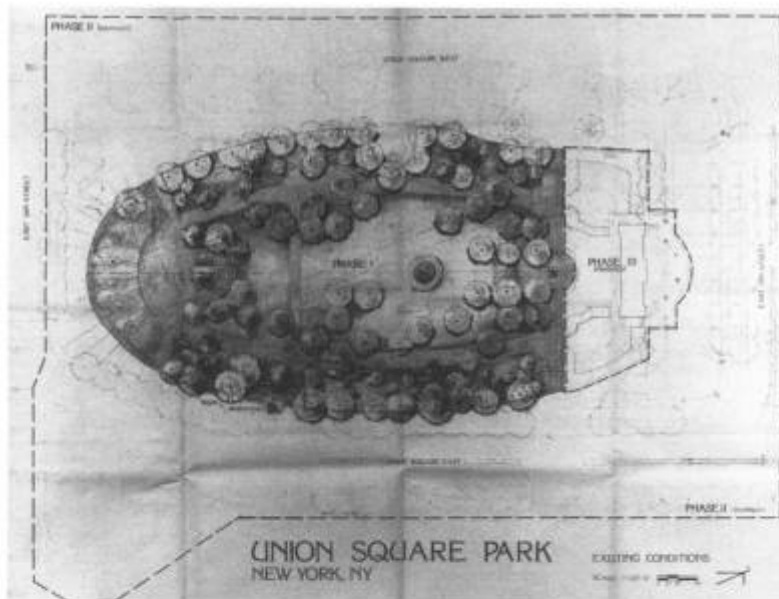
"George Washington" from *The Homeless Projection: a Proposal for Union Square*, Krzysztof Wodiczko, 1986. Courtesy 49th Parallel, New York.

Deutsche argues that even public art projects with the most radical potential in recent years have tended to be neutralized. Rather than merely focusing on corporate biases, Deutsche plays hardball against the heavies; "the boys" of early, supposedly radical postmodernism, including Frederic Jameson, David Harvey, Edward Soja and T.J. Clark. Deutsche argues in her essays "Men in Space" and "Boys Town" that the radical and democ-

many issues such as sexuality into the darkness of the private. Deutsche argues that older leftist art criticism has driven a lot of art-making, such as that dealing with sex, from the public realm into the private—a line in the sand that can then be re-enforced by the right.

Deutsche's essays begin with a review of Polish Canadian conceptual artist Krzysztof Wodiczko's 1986 *Homeless*





Union Square Park, architectural drawings for proposed modifications, 1983.

*Projection: A proposal for the City of New York*, which used projections to visually alter public monuments at night to highlight issues of disability and poverty. It is with Wodiczko in Manhattan that Deutsche begins her attack on municipal collusion in gentrification. From the use and abuse of public art in lower Manhattan, Deutsche moves on to the marketing of German expressionism as a foil in the gentrification of post-unification Berlin. She documents how the "need" for a pre-World War II aesthetic movement acts as a reminder of the previously unified city. She shows how West and East Berlin had and have a considerable amount of contemporary art that was dismissed for being too radical and too critical of the cultural processes associated with gentrification.

Deutsche's most theoretically powerful essay is a takeoff on *Chinatown*, the 1974 Roman Polanski film about gangsterism and water politics in early Los Angeles, with references to subsequent essays by writers including Mike Davis and other academics. Deutsche is hardest on the first wave of (male) postmodern theorists and their preoccupation with the "economic foundation of spatial violence" (p. 253), rather than confronting the continued omission of some

groups—such as women. Deutsche moves on to take a sceptical look at the significant controversy around the 1989 removal, the effective "eviction," of Richard Serra's public sculpture *Tilted Arc* from Federal Plaza in New York City and the bureaucratic uses and misuses of shifting notions of publicness. She is critical of the notions of the "public" in public art used by Richard Serra and his leftist allies, as well as those used by the U.S. government officials that eventually "evicted" the art.

The final essay, "Agoraphobia," outlines a vision of democratic culture where publicness in art is related to both the freedom to assert diverse experiences and contentiousness. She argues that, "How we define public space is intimately connected with ideas about what it means to be human, the nature of society, and the kind of political community we want" (p. 269). Deutsche goes deeper in her critique and looks at the problem of putting the words "public" and "art" together. She argues that the function of art to smooth over deeper social conflicts will never work, that publicness and art is about expressing activism and social contestation. *Evictions* ends with the beginning of a blueprint to stop evictions—of art, artists, the poor and marginalized.

As for Canadian cities, the "evictions" that Deutsche describes are on the increase. The increase of homeless people in affluent cities, such as Vancouver, continues largely unabated and is fuelled by real estate developers who increasingly use art and artists to market risky projects. In cities like Vancouver, art and artists become especially useful when housing markets are "soft," such as today, and projects are built in dangerous neighbourhoods—such as Gastown with its high levels of heroin addiction and violent crime. More decorative public art and bureaucratic frameworks, that have been entrenched in large cities, often effectively "privatize" space.

*Evictions* hurts to read but it makes sense. This book produces an uneasy clarity in its confirmation that a lot of so-called public art, that is increasingly installed around us, is not what it purports to be. Feeling concerned about the connections of art, gentrification, and homelessness? After *Evictions*, the links are undeniable.

**Note:**

1. Several major books have contributed to debates on these issues. On gender, sexuality and space, notable texts include Beatrix Colomina's 1992 anthology, *Sexuality & Space* (New York: Princeton University Press); Elizabeth Grosz' 1995 *Space, Time, and Perversion* (New York: Routledge) and Joel Sanders' 1996 anthology, *STUD: Architectures of Masculinity* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press).

Also, see Suzanne Lacy's 1995 anthology, *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay Press) for a thorough look at public art practice, and Mike Davis' 1990 essay, "Fortress L.A." in *City of Quartz* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992) for its examination of the complacency of public art within the privatization of public space.

Brent Ingram is one of the editors of the 1997 Bay Press anthology *Queers in Space: Communities|Public Places|Sites of Resistance*.