
Symposium: Public Art

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What is Public Art?:

Time, Place, and Meaning

I. A PUBLIC ART OF PLACE AND TIME

Public art is an oxymoron according to the standards of modernist art and aesthetic theory. Modern philosophical aesthetics focuses almost exclusively on subjective experience and a modified work of art. Art is taken to be the product of an individual and autonomous act of expression, and its appreciation is, likewise, a private act of contemplation. By contrast, as a public phenomenon, art must entail the artist's self-negation and deference to a collective community. It is interesting to observe that the recognized art of nearly all cultures, including that of the western European tradition prior to the late Renaissance, embraces just such a collective model, indulging the differences among individuals as variant manifestations of a common spirit. The celebrated treasures of Greece and Rome, as well as the Christian works of the Middle Ages and the age of the fresco that succeeded them, do not exalt the private vision of individual artists so much as they bespeak the shared values and convictions of cultural communities, and are accordingly to be found in those edifices and open places where people regularly gather to commemorate those same values and convictions. Privacy was for centuries a privative concept, demarcating the dissociated and limited experience of persons cut off from and below the level of full social humanity.¹

Modernism, with its glorification of the individual, has reversed that order, investing personhood with uniqueness and regarding the social as a derivative aggregate. Its representation of art, correspondingly, gives pride of place to that which is irreducibly personal. The aesthetic of modernism has yoked art with subjective consciousness and expression, and with a new con-

struction of freedom based on the possession of libertarian rights. In its defense, partisans, from Kant to the present, have endowed art with a liberatory function conceptually constructed out of a fusion of artistic independence (the unregulated genius) with political autonomy (the absence of heteronomous coercion). The autonomous individual, glorified in the person of the artist and secondarily in the created object, transcends the public, whose emancipatory benefit is vicarious and derivative.² The art denoted, however, is explicitly not that of the self-effacing tribal or (public) artist who reflects the culture of the community, but that of the self-affirming (private) individual.

Strictly speaking, no art is "private." Even those abortive essays consigned to flames in frustration by their authors were, presumably, made for, but withheld from, publication. But neither does art become "public" simply in virtue of its exposure and accessibility to the world. Publicity has social and political connotations that are untranslatable to public access. Conventionally, the term "public art" refers to a family of conditions including the object's origin, history, location, and social purpose. All of these conditions have changed their meanings in a world of evolving technology, secularization, cultural migration, and economic restructuring. Yet today's public artworks still have conceptual links with such traditional art forms as the medieval cathedral and the mural and temple ruins of ancient Mexican and Latin American civilizations.³

Like many complex social ideas, the concept of public art has undergone radical changes, and recent public quarrels which focus on an instance at hand—a current scandal or judicial decision—scarcely reveal the pluralization and polarization that both art and the notion of pub-

lic art have withstood. The monolithic cultural assumptions implicit in Roman forum statuary or an altar triptych or even the typical town square equestrian statue are no longer viable. The supposition that a visual form, an anthem, or a text might express its deepest values or unify a coherent social group has become a relic of romantic history.⁴ Instead, the concept of a public has become so problematized that putative works of public art demand justification in terms of qualitatively unrelated analyses of public space, public ownership, public representation, public interest, and the public sphere. Rarely does a work satisfy in all of these dimensions. Indeed, few works address or embody all of these aspects of publicity, and their selective attention to one or more of them—frequently conflict-ridden—accounts for the baffling variety of items proffered as public art.

What, then, remains to render an object a work of public art, if neither collective origin nor spiritual cohesiveness nor central placement nor even popularity serves to determine it? A crudely pragmatic and narrow definition of public art equates it with art installed by public agencies in public places and at public expense.⁵ But this is hardly sufficient to encompass the explosion of non-traditional projects that now lay claim to designation as public art. The two cases discussed in this symposium by Horowitz and Kelly, though superseded by more recent examples, lay the ground of disputation over contemporary public art. Both Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* and Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial were produced by artworld figures whose design proposals were selected from among other submissions by boards of artworld judges; thus from the vantage of the Institutional Theory of Art, both indisputably qualify as works of art.⁶ The Vietnam Veterans Memorial's construction was funded entirely by private donations (solicited from individual veterans); only its (public) placement on the Washington Mall required Congressional approval. Its location and explicit memorializing mission, however, would surely warrant its public designation by traditional standards. Ironically, the memorial's formal independence of government is what protected it from official intervention when a group of opponents objected to what they perceived to be its disrespectful and negative tone.⁷ Had it been pub-

licly funded, they might have been able to intervene more destructively. Instead, (also at private expense) the opposition succeeded only in winning the installation of a conventionally realist representation, complete with flagpole, nearby.

Tilted Arc was publicly funded and was also placed on a federally owned site. But, Serra's claims to First Amendment protection notwithstanding, the fact that the *Arc* was initiated by the government did not ensure against its destruction. Both its erection and its subsequent demise were presided over by decisions of the United States General Services Administration. Although the sculpture belonged to the United States government and was displayed on government property, the judge who condemned the sculpture to removal declared it a privatization of public space.⁸ Neither location in a public place nor inception by a state agency sufficiently identified it as public art in Judge Pollack's estimation. That alone might not have warranted its removal, but many critics from within and without the artworld agreed with him that, whether or not that was tantamount to its destruction, the sculpture should be removed from its site.⁹

Public art today seems to engage more abstract concerns and more ephemeral interpretations of site, memory, and meaning. Space and time continue to play a definitive part, but like most philosophical categories, their meaning has grown attenuated. They no longer refer simply to "where" and "when," but have become symbolic and relational indicators, far removed from the coordinates that once sufficed to situate things. Today's public artworks may be impermanent and discontinuous, like the installations of Suzanne Lacy. They may subsist only momentarily or in multiple instantiations, immaterially suspended, like the projections of Krzysztof Wodiczko. They may be unheroically unspectacular, like the neighborhood sculptures of John Ahearn or like the local landscapes of Sondquist. And they may be realized exclusively in discrete mental spaces, like some of the exhortations of the Guerrilla Girls. How then do they qualify as public art?

II. A PUBLIC ART OF MEANING

Modernism and its formalist aesthetic dictated a stripped-down public as well as a minimalist

private art. Site-specificity took on a spatial and architectural rather than occasional meaning, and with the demise of content, public art became first an object in public space, and then a sculpting of that space as objects too evaporated, leaving only relations behind. And, since relations exist in the eye of the beholder, the audience (before it too was eliminated) became a necessary ingredient in the work of art, rendering it public in a new and non-ceremonial sense. Public art became vernacular, having to do not with a spirit that magnifies as it collectivizes, but with ordinary, unmythicized people in ordinary places and with the ordinary events of their mundane lives.¹⁰

At the same time that it became more abstract, public art also became more explicitly communitarian. The audience no longer figured as passive onlooker but as participant, actively implicated in the constitution of the work of art. Effectively, the work's realization depends on the audience's bestowal of meaning upon it, a contentious social and political undertaking. The integration of the public into the work of art is inherently political, and is as such equally congenial to both conservative and revolutionary ideology. Public art has been used to great effect promotionally and oppositionally by all political persuasions. Nazi architecture, designed by Albert Speer and gorgeously displayed in Leni Riefenstahl's film *Triumph of the Will* complements the political *bon mot* of Joseph Goebbels: "'The statesman is an artist too. For him the people is neither more nor less than what stone is for the sculptor.'" ¹¹ The same sentiment, directed toward more benign ends, is intended in the work of Vito Acconci, Siah Armajani, Beverly Pepper, Mierle Ukeles, and Christo, among many others who strive to arouse and capture the social conscience of a passive public. Sometimes despairing, sometimes hortatory, and sometimes uplifting, all these artists agree in stating that human beings are not and shall not be detached from the social and natural world. Hostile or harmonious, the world resonates with the human presence, intrudes upon it, and will not be denied.

Perhaps the very lability of social and aesthetic interactions and their receptivity to multiple interpretations accounts for the difficulty the public sometimes experiences "reading" public works. As Michael North points out in compar-

ing what he calls the "modest populism" of Siah Armajani with the "bleak puritanism" of Lauren Ewing, "The very techniques [s/]he chooses to represent commonality can also represent the conformity that [the artist] means to expose."¹² It is interesting that opposite reasons can be given for identical judgments of a single work, just as different works may be oppositely judged for the same reasons. The cases discussed by Horowitz and Kelly involve just such interpretive ambiguity. *Tilted Arc*, avowed by its author to be politically motivated, was denounced by a number of critics for its elitist aestheticism; while the overtly apolitical Vietnam Veterans Memorial narrowly avoided destruction by opponents who called it a subversive "wailing wall for anti-draft demonstrators." Both works are formally abstract, minimalist in design, and both were selected by artworld juries, presumably on the basis of their aesthetic merit alone.

Both works profess a site-specificity that is neither purely spatial nor locally commemorative. Serra maintained that the site-specificity of *Tilted Arc* was determined as much by material social conditions as by aesthetic exigency. He meant to confront the public in *behavioral space* "in which the viewer interacts with the sculpture in its context. ... to engage the public in a dialogue that would enhance, both perceptually and conceptually, its relation to the entire plaza." The sculpture would not literally interdict movement, but it would (and did) cause the viewer to feel blocked. The experience of oppression was real enough, but Serra wanted it to redirect attention to its actual source in the mechanisms of state power. He hoped that the sculpture would redefine the space in terms of itself; and so it did—even beyond his expectation. The crusade for the removal of the sculpture was initiated by a federal judge and federal employees who protested the affront committed by the *Arc* and the aggression it might inspire, but in their testimony some revealed a deeper sensibility—a consciousness raised and smothered by oppression from elsewhere. Far from letting aesthetic considerations recede into irrelevancy, they had read them rightly as inseparable from deepest values. *Tilted Arc* evoked the pressure of coercion. Only the source of that unwelcome feeling was ambiguous.¹³

In their analyses for this symposium, Horowitz and Kelly disagree over the meaning of

site-specificity. Kelly holds that *Tilted Arc* fails to be site-specific, since “the public” is reduced to the abstraction of “traffic” and was excluded from consultation regarding the sculpture’s selection. In other words, the piece does not inhabit the public sphere. Horowitz, on the other hand, claims that the managed opposition to *Tilted Arc* was a cynical subversion of its deliberately achieved menace, converting the aesthetic dis-ease it provoked into mistrust of the work as an actual threat. His survey of circulation notwithstanding, Serra certainly did mean to disrupt the specious openness of Federal Plaza, but the dialogue that ensued did not have the political outcome he anticipated.

It may be that, whether with persons or with places, dialogue does not always end happily. If the aim of site-specific art (which, by the way, is not coextensive with public art) is to evoke “critical adjustment” to a place, that can end with its acceptance or rejection. Another alternative is that it sustain attention to a subject that is enlightened but remains unresolved.¹⁴

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial seems to engage its visitors in just such a critical colloquy. Constrained by the conditions of the contest she won to make a design that was contemplative, harmonious with its site and surroundings, and that would make no political statement about the war, Maya Lin produced a work that evokes profound emotions in viewers, whatever their political sympathies.¹⁵ The Vietnam Veterans Memorial manages to work as public art both in the traditional sense that it occupies public space and memorializes a public event, and in the current sense that it questions the meaning of that space and that event and draws the public into intelligent discourse with it. In doing this, it brings an additional aspect of publicity into focus, that it is multiform and multivalent, recalling that the forum is a place for debate—and not just a site for communion or collective affirmation. Speaking of the work of Lin (and Hans Haacke), Michael North says:

{I}t is not the public experience of space but rather public debate that becomes a work of art. They make manifest an important truth about public space, that unless it is embedded in a larger public sphere that values debate, a public sphere like that defined by Jürgen Habermas in which private people use their reason to discuss and reach conclusions, then it will

always be decorated by mass ornaments, no matter what sort of art is put into it.¹⁶

Despite its nonrepresentational modernist aesthetic, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is not a “mass ornament”; neither is it “nihilistic.”

It is clear that location and accessibility are misleading parameters of publicity. Sizable works of art are now commonly commissioned for such semipublic places as university grounds, hospitals, housing developments, and bank lobbies. Government subsidy often mandates the inclusion of artworks under percent-for-art regulation, and private corporations receive tax benefits for the cultural contribution they make in the form of artistic embellishment. But the sheer presence of art out-of-doors or in a bus terminal or a hotel reception area does not automatically make that art public—no more than placing a tiger in a barnyard would make it a domestic animal. The object, artwork or animal, does not derive its identity from the character of the place in which it is found. Public placement does, however, make the work available to more people than might otherwise experience it, and, depending upon the extension of legal coverage to it, the freedom of expression of the artist(s) who made it is more or less protected.¹⁷

No more than does its location, the mere integration of art into the ordinary life of people fails to bestow social meaning upon it and does not render it public. Collaborations that include artists along with architects and engineers in the landscape design and planning of office or housing projects often end with what have been called “corporate baubles.” These are public in the sense that they are inscribed in spaces not usually set aside for private art experiences; and they are art in the sense that their function is chiefly aesthetic, but they neither satisfy the traditional memorializing criteria of public art nor engage citizens in any but the most superficial social and aesthetic interactions of the public sphere.¹⁸

It must be recalled that the very places paradigmatically designated for private aesthetic viewing, museums and galleries, are public in that, discounting the increasingly prohibitive price of entry, they are open to anyone. Yet, even were this to guarantee universal access to their contents, the items contained in museums would not be public art. Although museums were founded to liberate objects previously confined

in private treasuries and to place them in the public sphere by declaring them national property, those objects became “privatized” and extracted from the public sphere by virtue of the very aesthetic appropriation that made them “museum pieces.”¹⁹

Being museum art, with all the artworld anointment that this entails, appears to bar the way to an object’s having public art status, but even that qualification is dissipating. There is burgeoning interest now among private museums and publicly funded art institutions to display self-designated public art. The exhibits are mostly descriptive and conceptual, involving verbal or pictorial records and documentation of ephemeral events that are somewhere else, did happen, or cannot be reproduced. Their publicity is a matter of faith and Xerox machines. Do these representations become private art when they are mounted on the walls of the Whitney Museum or the Institute of Contemporary Art? Has the public sphere lost its claim to them or has it too been assimilated into the sanctum of the private?²⁰

The presence or absence of walls, doors, and columns no longer separates private from public space.²¹ Indeed, space itself no longer attaches to materiality; and thus whatever material displacement might have marked their difference no longer distinguishes public from private space. Meanings occupy virtual spaces, and traffic through them is subject only to the limits of fantasy. In fantasy, as Horowitz suggests, a space can represent powerlessness or liberation, and an ambiguous object can challenge power or dissolve a dream. The creative display of objects and their deployment for aesthetic pleasure are revealed as politically significant acts. This is no less true of art heretofore cordoned off as private than of avowedly public art. Both share as art in a designation meant to depoliticize the concept. By declaring itself “public,” public art points to the impropriety of that characterization and reclaims the political status of all art.

Who speaks for the public? There are many who position themselves in that role—judges, government officials, corporate moneymakers, social scientists, and philosopher-critics. Artists, despite their professed asocial status, are as deeply engaged in the public sphere as those whose civic function is ordained by definition. Artists do not have privileged vision, but they do

have a practiced eye and the ability to speak in a rich variety of languages—verbal, visual, conceptual, sensual, serious, humorous, figurative, and rational. Sometimes and somehow they break through ordinary expectation and cause people to venture upon new perspectives. This is not because they have made an orbital leap from private to public, but because their insightful expression ignites response. Public art cannot promise public understanding, any more than private art assures private salvation, whatever these might be. We have turned to artists in moments of distress as we formerly turned to religion, and then to science, for public enlightenment and private satisfaction. Each has stirred up its own problems and given us some gratification in return. We should not expect consensus. To cite Patricia Phillips’s appreciation of public art: “It is an art which is absolutely engaged with the world and this engagement often invokes spirited disagreement. ... Absolute consensus is not necessarily a happy state.”²² But perhaps it is a better state than one that constructs mutual destruction or mutual avoidance as the only alternatives.

To revert to my initial dilemma, I suggest that it is private—not public—art that evokes contradiction. Exceeding even the error of aesthetic enshrinement is the political wrong of negating art’s publicity as a site of multiple meaning and communicative exchange. But art is escaping its confinement to private sensibility. It is descending into the streets once more and reclaiming its place in the public realm.²³

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1. Hannah Arendt describes the public realm as conceived in antiquity as the common world of reality, in which human beings coexist in freedom, a world of politics, history, and continuity. The private realm is privative. To enter it is to be imprisoned in the subjectivity of singular experience (no matter how often it is replicated by the identical experience of others.) It is to be “deprived of things essential to a truly human life ... of the reality of being seen and heard by others ... to be deprived of the possibility of achieving something more than life itself.” See Arendt, *The Human Condition* (University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 58.

Jürgen Habermas describes a later (seventeenth century) sense of public realm that refers to permanent structures of communication and authority. In this sense, "public" connotes state related and controlling, while "private" is a correlative concept referring to those socially significant functions (and persons who enact them) that are regulated. "The relationship between the authorities and the subjects thereby assumed the peculiar ambivalence of public regulation and private initiative." As with Arendt, privacy is conceived privately. The private person lacks perspective and knowledge, and is therefore unqualified to take part in social decision-making. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (MIT Press, 1989), p. 24.

2. Possibly the most explicit and stirring expression of this view appears in Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. Reginald Snell (Yale University Press, 1954).

3. The Bulgarian artist, Christo, likens his wrapping of public buildings and landscapes to the construction of the cathedrals. See his video interviews in "Islands," produced by the Maysles Brothers. See also Timothy W. Drescher, *San Francisco Murals: Community Creates Its Muse, 1914-1990* (St. Paul: Pogo Press, 1991) for an analysis of contemporary Latino mural art.

4. Emblems such as these have been displaced by the purely visual logo, unencumbered by historical associations or significance.

5. W. J. T. Mitchell, "The Violence of Public Art," in *Art and the Public Sphere*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 38.

6. Maya Lin, though only twenty-one at the time and as yet unknown, was an art student at Yale University, well-versed in the same modernist tradition as her older and more established compatriot, Richard Serra.

7. Detractors took umbrage at its black color, the fact that it "sinks" into the ground, its "unheroic" mass, and the reflective surface that confronts viewers with their own images superimposed upon the names of the dead.

8. "The sculpture as presently located has features of a purpresture ... [:] 'An inclosure by a private person of a part of that which belongs to, and ought to be free and open to the enjoyment of the public at large,'" Judge Milton Pollack, *Richard Serra v. United States General Services Administration*, 667 F. Supp. 1042, 1056, n. 7 (S.D.N.Y. 1987), cited in Barbara Hoffman, "Law for Art's Sake in the Public Realm," in Mitchell, ed., *Art and the Public Sphere*, p. 116.

9. Arthur Danto is a case in point. Writing in favor of the removal of *Tilted Arc*, he says: "The public has an interest in the existence of museums, but it also has an interest in not having all of its open spaces treated as though they were museums, in which esthetic [i.e., private] interests rightly dominate. The delicate architectural siting of *Tilted Arc* in Federal Plaza ignores the human realities of the place. Were he not blind to everything but the esthetic, Serra could learn something about human orientation to space and place. Standing where it does, *Tilted Arc* is the metal grin of the art world having bitten off a piece of the public world, which it means to hold in its teeth forever, the public be damned." Danto, *The State of the Art* (New York: Prentice-Hall Press, 1987), pp. 93-94.

10. Of course there are exceptions. Much of fascist public

art preserves the heroic sublation of "the folk." It was the genius of Leni Riefenstahl to create of film an art form that exalted the ordinary to heroic proportions, inspiring people to identify with a non-individuated ideal whose magnificence "uebermenschlichkeit" did not seem a contradiction.

11. From Goebbels's novel, *Michael* (1929), cited by Michael North, in "The Public as Sculpture: From Heavenly City to Mass Ornament," from a prior citation in Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby's introduction to Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), p. cxlii. See "The Public as Sculpture," in Mitchell, ed., *Art and the Public Sphere*, pp. 9-28.

12. North, "The Public as Sculpture," p. 23.

13. Douglas Crimp, "Redefining Site Specificity," in *On the Museum's Ruins* (MIT Press, 1993). Another discussion of a similar instance of site-displaced hostility may be found in James E. Young's account of Sol Lewitt's *Black Form*, an installation in Germany's "Skulptur Projekte 87" to commemorate the missing Jews of Münster. Like *Tilted Arc*, this work attracted graffiti and political slogans and many complaints that it obstructed traffic, and it too was removed barely a year after its dedication. See Young, "The Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today," in Mitchell, ed., *Art and the Public Sphere*, pp. 49-79.

14. This, after all, is how most of Plato's dialogues do end.

15. Charles L. Griswold, "The Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Washington Mall: Philosophical Thoughts on Political Iconography," in Mitchell, ed., *Art and the Public Sphere*, pp. 79-111.

The response is sometimes unsympathetic to Lin. Frederick Hart, the producer of the "counter" memorial *Three Fighting Men*, which was installed a year afterward, said of Lin's memorial that it is "intentionally not meaningful. ... a serene exercise in contemporary art done in a vacuum with no knowledge of the subject. It's nihilistic—that's its appeal," "An Interview with Frederick Hart," inset in Elizabeth Hess, "A Tale of Two Memorials," *Art in America* 71, no. 4 (1983): 124.

16. North, "The Public as Sculpture," p. 28.

17. Courts do not regard all places where people gather as equally public. Streets and parks have "immemorially been held in trust for the use of the public," but even where theaters or other assembly sites are owned by governments, courts have found that public communication in them may be controlled by different standards. Not every open plaza is also a public forum and not every form of expression is equally permitted (Hoffman, "Law for Art's Sake").

18. There are, of course, exceptions to this superficiality. The waterfront development of New York's Battery Park City enlisted artists to create an environment that would foster neighborly interaction, and a community of sorts has in fact been produced.

Another example of a project that builds civic consciousness is New York City's Arts for Transit program. Established in 1985, this program renews a principle intended by the planners of the transportation system in 1899: "The railway and its equipment ... constitute a great public work. All parts of the structure where exposed to public sight shall therefore be designed, constructed and maintained with a view to the beauty of their appearance, as well as their efficiency" (cited from the initial construction contract in the brochure for the *Art en Route* exhibition, PaineWebber Art Gallery, New York, 1994). The contemporary mandate is to

provide the public with an experience that is “interesting, stimulating and aesthetically pleasing.” The public is in fact involved in a variety of ways:

- a) By sometimes taking part in the selection of projects from among those submitted by artist proposals.
- b) By sometimes contributing to the creative design or participating in its execution.
- c) Through commemorative reference to local inhabitants, culture, history.
- d) By responsiveness of the art to expressed neighborhood needs and interests (environmental, political, educational).
- e) Through promotion of public awareness of the art and identification with it.

19. Napoleon created the first public museum, the Louvre, by nationalizing the formerly private palace and declaring its treasures national property. Citizens thereby gained access to the collection and could take pride in it, but it was the museum and not the art that was rendered public. If anything, the privacy of the aesthetic experience was intensified by the new emphasis on aesthetic sensibility and the educability of individual taste.

20. The complexity of this question is multiplied when the exhibiting institution does not even have the public sta-

tus of a museum, but is a privately owned corporation, e.g., PaineWebber, which opens its reception space to the public for an artistic display of artworks—models, maquettes, photographs, and drawings of works of (public) art whose realized embodiment as public art can be discovered simply by taking a ride on the (public) transportation system.

21. The critic, Patricia Phillips, observes that the millions of television viewers of the lighted apple’s descent in New York’s Times Square New Year’s Eve celebration are as much a part of the public spectacle as are the thousands of witnesses on the street. Only the meaning of the word “public” has changed, becoming more “psychologically internalized” as a result of developments in urban and information systems. See Phillips, “Public Art’s Critical Condition,” *On View* 1, no. 1 (1990): 12.

22. Cited in Pam Korza, “Evaluating Artistic Quality in the Public Realm: A Report of the *On View* Symposium on Public Art, May 1989, Harvard University,” *On View* 1, no. 1 (1990): 76.

23. I would like to thank my co-symposiasts Gregg Horowitz and Michael Kelly, as well as the anonymous readers and the editor of this journal for their helpful and incisive criticism.