What do images in public space do? (Geneva, 19-20 Jan 17)

University of Geneva, Jan 19–20, 2017
Deadline: May 31, 2016

Allison Huetz

What do images in public space do?

In the field of visual studies, important recently-published or translated works address the agency of images: what power do images hold; what do they accomplish; what do they want; can we speak of an image-act? In parallel, the concepts of performance and performativity have been more and more invoked in the social sciences, and now especially in geography.

This conference, organized by the Department of Geography of the University of Geneva, stands at the intersection of these scientific agendas, is about the work of images in public space. Advertisements and political posters, statues, portraits, and figurative monuments; giant screens installed in public squares, or projections on the faces of buildings; murals, artistic installations, and street art; photographic exhibitions in gardens and parks; illustrated maps in public spaces, etc.: indeed, images of all kinds, exercising very diverse functions, proliferate in public spaces.

To what extent do these images affect, create, or transform the places, actors and practices with which they are associated? How are images created with, and in, public space? What symbolic, social and political stakes does their presence hold? The conference will revolve around these questions, which have hardly been explored, yet are important for both visual and urban studies.

These interrogations seek to take up two challenges. Visual studies, on the one hand, often place more emphasis on images than on the apparatuses of their visualization, their spatial context, or the social networks within which they are inscribed. Thus, works on the agency of images often focus on specific images deemed particularly powerful or performative, for instance works of art, while giving little attention to more banal or vernacular images, the conditions proper to their agency, or the spectators themselves. On the other hand, for the social sciences, and geography in particular, visual culture has hardly been an object of investigation, particularly as tied to urban life. Some studies have certainly addressed the image of the city, or art (especially artistic performances) in public space, but rarely visual culture in its popular sense and its place in the city.

By reflecting on the role of images—all images—in public space, we hope to advance on both these fronts.

We envision the following lines of questioning:

1. The production and placing of images in public space

- What images do we find in public spaces?
- Do the evolution of images and their presence in public space proceed from the emergence of new visual and urban cultures?
- Which images have been placed where, by whom and towards what ends? What are the uses, rules, or regulations which determine their presence?
- Is the placing of images in public space subject to urban policies? Which images evade these urban policies or subvert the dominant political order?
- What are the apparatuses by which these images are shown and seen? How and in what conditions do they function?

2. The reception of images and public reactions
- Who sees what images in public space? Who does not see them?
- What reactions do these images provoke: what is perceived, experienced, thought, or done upon seeing these images, or afterward?
- Does the presence of images in public space give rise to forms of iconophilia or iconoclasm? How are such images judged esthetically, morally, politically, or otherwise? What practices of transgression, hijacking, or protest might they entail?

3. The agency of images in and on public space
- Can these images be analyzed in terms of performance or performativity? How can these concepts help us think about what images do in public spaces?
- To what extent, and in what ways, do these images modify the landscape and transform urban space?
- Is urban space produced and/or visualized through images or the apparatuses for visualization in place there: belvederes, panoramic viewpoints, orientation tables, urban panoramas, telescopes, mises en abimes, etc.?
- Do these images exercise a form of power, violence or coercion on certain publics? Who would the victims be? Conversely, who do the images benefit, and in what way?
- What are the norms (of gender, class, race, sexuality, etc.) carried by images in public space, and what are the consequences of these on the practices and identities at play?

P.S.
- Public space is understood here in its specific and restrictive sense, that is, excluding virtual spaces (the media, internet, social networks, etc.). We include, however, commercial spaces and institutions open to the public; public spaces of the city center as well as of the periphery; urban settings as well as rural settings, both here and abroad; public spaces in the past, as well as today.
- Images are here understood as visual and figurative representations, including for example statues, but generally excluding mental maps and images, artistic performances and spectacles, non-figurative street art, graffiti tags, etc.

Calendar
- Paper proposals (including CV, title, and abstract of approximately 500 words) in either French or English should be submitted by May 31, 2016 to: colloqueimages@unige.ch
- Speakers will be informed of their acceptance in June, 2016 -
The conference will be held on January 19 and 20, 2017

Organizing committee
Allison Huetz, Université de Genève
Clémence Lehec, Université de Genève
Thierry Maeder, Université de Genève
Raphaël Pieroni, Université de Genève
Estelle Sohier, Université de Genève
Jean-François Staszak, Université de Genève

Scientific committee
Anne-Laure Amilhat Szary, Université Joseph Fourier, Grenoble
Dominic Bryan, Queen's University, Belfast
Dominique Crozat, Université Paul Valéry Montpellier
Pauline Guinard, Ecole normale supérieure, Paris
Katharina Hohmann, Haute école d'art et de design de Genève
Michel Lussault, Ecole normale supérieure, Lyon
Laurent Matthey, Université de Genève
Malcolm Miles, Plymouth University
Gillian Rose, Open University
Reuben Rose-Redwood, University of Victoria (Canada)
Ola Söderström, Université de Neuchâtel
Mercedes Volait, Institut national d'histoire de l'art, Paris
Mechtild Widrich, Ecole polytechnique fédérale, Zurich

Reference:
CFP: What do images in public space do? (Geneva, 19-20 Jan 17). In: ArtHist.net, Mar 23, 2016 (accessed Nov 19, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/12532>.