Public Art:
History and Meaning

Inevitably, in the path of our advance will be found historical monuments and cultural centers which symbolize to the world all that we are fighting to preserve. It is the responsibility of every commander to protect and respect these symbols whenever possible.

—DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER

The statesman is an artist too. For him the people is neither more nor less than what stone is for the sculptor.

—JOSEPH GOEBBEIS

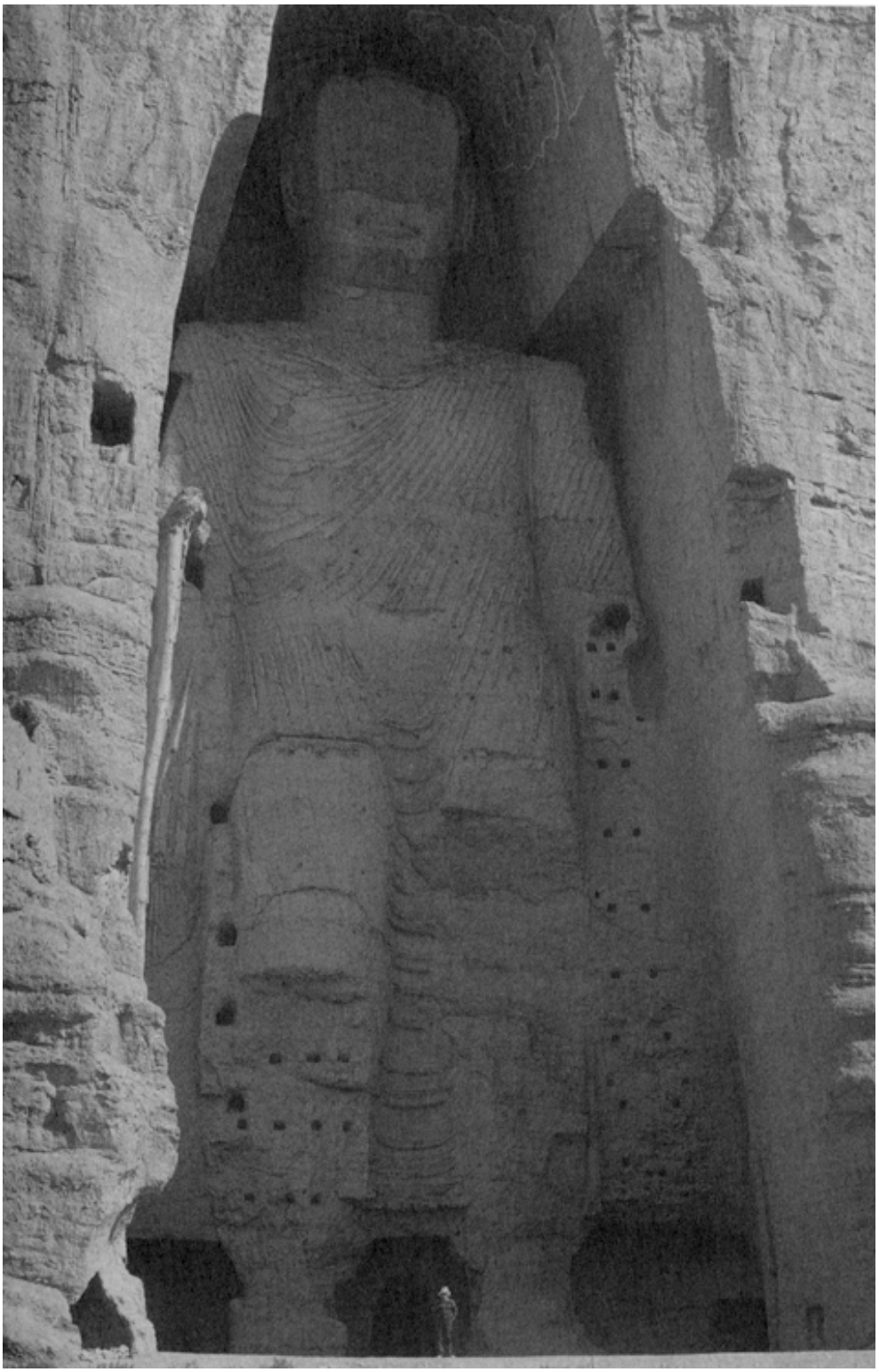
Public Art Constructs a Public

If private art suggests an intimate exchange, public art gathers a congregation. While I have observed that all art is to some degree public, public art merits its name in virtue of the fact that the creation of a public is its point of departure. Public art presupposes the public sphere and produces a public in relation to that concept. Unlike

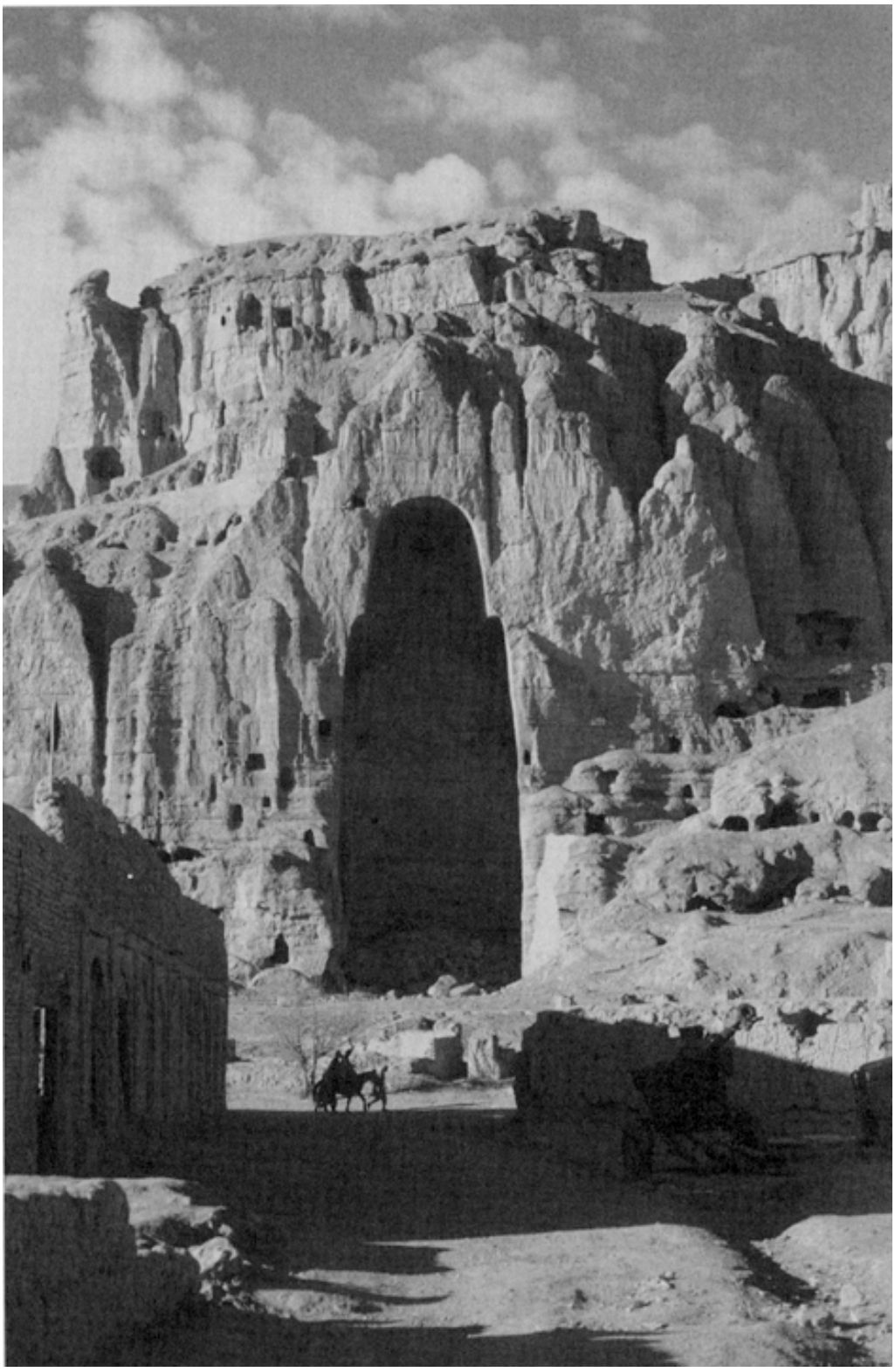
popular or mass art, it does not assume a preexistent generic audience to be entertained or instructed but sets out to forge a specific public by means of an aesthetic interaction. The constructed public's response need not be unanimous or favorable, but a reaction is crucial to the work's actualization. The art-making is implicitly a social process: it can be exhortative, commemorative, triumphal, perhaps expressive of collective grief, anger, celebration—or occasionally aggressively provocative. The public may be enlisted to join a movement or antagonized, incited to protest or exhilarated. Personal expression is not the central motivator of public art, and originality is less imperative for public than for private art, where the individual artist's psyche initiates the work.

Public art preceded "art world" institutions such as critical journals and museums that came into being with private art and is not dependent upon them. Arguably descended from antiquity, public art thrives in the real world of bird droppings and vandalism. It is so commonplace as to be easily overlooked, yet the powerful feelings it sometimes evokes, principally toward what it represents, can explode into bloody violence. There are fabled histories of public art that no longer exists but remains in memory or imagination. Among them is the golden calf built by the Israelites, impatient in the absence of Moses, who, upon descending from Mount Sinai with the tablets of the Ten Commandments, ordered the idol destroyed. Another example of persistent public art is the Bamiyan Buddhas, erected in the second century C.E. during the reign of the emperor Kouchin Kanichka, sovereign of Bactria, along the "silk road" that conveyed Buddhism from India. The Buddha statues were demolished by Taliban Islamists in 2001, but their exact replication is under consideration. Both of these razings were carried out in a spirit of righteous repression of idolatry. Attacking the "idols" is also a displaced assault on the people that worship them, and their replacement would be a political declaration.

Hybrid in many respects, public art cuts across a variety of polarities. It is not addressed to a specific sensory receptor or limited by medium but appears in every mode of aesthetic expression and some that have never been considered that.' Remarkably, public art is able to transgress temporal and spatial constraints to achieve such feats as the simultaneous, worldwide millennial choral performance of Beethoven's Ode to joy. A comparably synchronized global event was the "Lysistrata Project," coordinated with telekinetic synergy by feminist and peace organizations and consisting of independent performances of Aristophanes' antiwar classic. Note that conventional performances of these well-known works in theaters and concert halls are not perceived as public art, but the scale of their "orchestrated" worldwide production introduces a new dimension that rendered the art public. However, scale alone is not a defining parameter of public art.



Bamiyan Buddha with statue. (Photo by Fabio Remondino, ETH, Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, Institute of Geodesy and Photogrammetry, Zurich, Switzerland.)



Enclave of destroyed Bamiyan Buddha. (Photo by Luke Powell.)

Like other contemporary theorists, I distinguish between "public art," which, I hold, constructs a public, and "art in public places," which, while it may have public value, is characterized chiefly in virtue of its location and bureaucratic legitimization. The geography of the public sphere is not reducible to either site or function. The extremes are dear enough, but the distinction between public art and art that is publicly accessible is not rigid. Neighborhoods are well served, for example, by art sited to conceal the sights and sounds of highways or to relieve road-weary automobile passengers with pleasant diversions along the way. The art that decorates town plazas, shopping malls, and the lobbies of public buildings also provides physical comfort and gathering places for socializing elders and workers on lunch break. Urban (or suburban) design features such as these are designated "real estate architecture," and the public, often unaware that they are commissioned projects by professional artists, accepts the landscaped sites and benches as a species of background music. Formally this is designated public art.

Known also as "corporate baubles," some publicly situated decorations contribute aesthetic value to office buildings and industrial parks, but they are public art only by linguistic courtesy. They advertise the (semi)-public character of the space they occupy insofar as their aesthetic presence invites public entry.‘ They pacify, but they do not promote affinity among the patrons. Fellow elevator passengers or occupants of the lobbies of commercial centers are linked spatially, but they do not constitute a public. They have little to say to one another unless the lights go out. A shaping event is necessary to make a public of them. Like the law, public art aims both to express and to affect its culture. If too extreme, it will be rejected or destroyed; if too banal, it will be ignored. Like legislators and judges, public artists are absorbed into the historic process of cultural transformation, of which their art is a manifestation. It is measured against the double and sometimes contradictory standards of aesthetic merit and social or political acceptability. Public artists thus incur the risk of both artistic and social failure. Their achievement in one dimension can be injurious in the other and may not survive the conflict.

Obscurity sometimes provides political sanctuary. In the 1980s, for example, the masked Guerrilla Girls startled art establishments with a barrange of brilliantly executed assaults designed to expose the unequal and exploitative treatment of women by the art world. The gorilla disguises and anonymity adopted by these women, all of whom were, to some degree, members of the art world, attracted attention and lent them authority they could not otherwise have achieved. That was part of their message—who would listen to them without the novelty of their masks? The gorilla masks they donned and noms dc guerre borrowed from historical women artists were also a protective device, necessary to preserve careers and personal safety as these public artists broadcast their exposé of sexism in the art world.

Intentional anonymity is also a means to express solidarity with a similarly unidentified public. The workers who sculpted the “Elgin” marbles on the Acropolis or constructed the medieval cathedrals were artisans neglected by official art history. We do not know their names and can only hope that their labor was adequately rewarded by the public of their day. But in 1979, an association of young artists assigned themselves the impersonal title "Group Material" in order to challenge the individualistic premises of modern private art-making. Working collaboratively and anonymously, deliberately eschewing fame, they sought to imitate their ideal of the obscure medieval artisan by foregrounding the social activism of their art instead of their own personalities. While the collectivism of their art-making is not to be confused with collectivism as a political doctrine or with tribal communitarianism, these artists were seeking a new aesthetic idiom in a society indifferent to collective ideals and interests. Other artists, similarly motivated to reject the cult of the isolated genius, have also been working with and deferring to the public served by art. This public is not enticed by commodities destined for idiosyncratic collectors or connoisseurs. Found conceptually between the privatized consumer and an impersonal state structure, the public persona comes together and grows through its encounter with art.