

THE LAST FRONTIER(S): CITY & SUBURB / LOOKING AROUND

PART IV

Use ideas and examples from part IV (and previous parts) to explore the following questions.

1. In what ways are we “divorced from history”? What are the consequences of this divorce (good and/or bad)? How/why did the divorce occur?
2. How are urban and rural communities connected to place in similar and different ways?
3. What is your sense of how the potential for a cultural “center” changed in the U.S. over the last century? How has multicenteredness strengthened and weakened us politically (in relation to our own system)?
4. What is the artist’s responsibility to issues of class? Do the notions of High Art and Low Art (not to mention “Outsider Art”) perpetuate conflicts and inequity?
5. How is multicenteredness played out differently in urban as opposed to rural spaces?
6. Compare the vague concept of “progress” as it is tongued by politicians and capitalists to concepts of “progress” associated with art-making and community.
7. How is the distribution of power related to the quantity and quality of public spaces?
8. Can you think of examples from your experience of “public spaces” that endowed you and the community you shared the space with to have a sense of a significant local center?

PART V

Chapter One: Public Art: Old and New Clothes

“My concern in this book has been to interweave pressing issues concerning land, culture, and place with the possibility of an art boasting stronger contextual ties and audience access.”

As many a writer is prone to do, Lippard is condensing all of her arguments and questions into the last section, restating in newly vibrant terms all the concepts fleshed out before. Nonetheless, it’s no walk in the park.

This first chapter focusses on terms and questions. The questions are obvious. She asks very good ones. Answer them as best you can. Try to imagine what makes them important questions.

It might be nice to pull some of the terms out and put them on paper. Try defining some of them.
(page references cite one occurrence, where there may be many more)

art for the long haul (p264)

public art (p264)

cultural democracy (267, 282)

public – passive or active (p272)

community art (p272)

the public (p273)

p274: distinctions between: activist art, site art, land art, place art

placeless place (p275)

2. “Artists are trained to think of themselves as “free,” and the challenge of public art lies in dealing with other people’s freedom as well.” (p264) How do you respond to this idea as an artist?

3. Lippard has a response of sorts on page 269, asking, “How can these changes be built into art education, into the career mechanisms, into the possibilities that a life of artmaking holds for those tempted by such risks?”

Chapter Two: Places with a Present

1. The dense summary of her response to the show “About Place” is followed by a few easily digestible portions: “We need some artists to draw back from abstractions and consider shared experiences/ A “place ethic” demands a respect for a place that is rooted more deeply than an aesthetic version of “the tourist gaze” provided by imported artists whose real concerns lie elsewhere or back in their studios.” These two concepts are a good reference point with which to decode some of Lippard’s criticisms of the exhibition.

2. Lippard quotes Hans Haacke: “‘purely visual art is increasingly unable to communicate the complexity of the contemporary world,’ recommending ‘hybrid forms of communication, mixture of many media, including the context in which they are applied as signifiers.’” ...just what Tom Yody was saying about installation art and multimedia collaborations. The phrase “including the context” gives us a bridge to place, and should be read broadly so that the hybrid is not just a recombination, reorientation within the arts, but is a reintegration of the artist and art into local, community life. Do you agree with this new construction of the artist? What do artists gain and give up who accept this challenge?

3. On page 282, Lippard uses that term “cultural democracy,” now teamed up with “regionalism” and “community arts.” Don’t let this paragraph get away from you. Connect these ideas to those coming up in the last paragraph beginning on page 283, about the goals of community art, and the difference between being “about place” and “from place.”

Chapter Three: Entering the Big Picture

This chapter, and the other two of this section, we will be returning to throughout the year. Lippard gives a clear description of her “place ethic,” asks some important questions, and generally lays a blueprint for a different definition of the artist in relation to society.

If you have any resistance to her definition of an artist, consider what aspects of your training to be an artist, what myths that make the life of the artist appealing, and what goals you have as an artist that resist the kind of change that Lippard is advocating.

If you were to become the kind of artist that Lippard imagines, how would that fit into the story of your life?