

When Place Becomes Prop: Public Art, Private Selves, and the Aesthetic of Spectacle

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Back in 2018, during my first visit to Los Angeles, I made the necessary pitstop downtown and visited Chris Burden’s *Urban Light* assemblage sculpture in front of the LACMA. I say “necessary,” not because I had any idea what the public art piece was but more so because my friend and travel companion told me that we “just had” to do it. In the spirit of being a good companion (and not being in the driver’s seat during this getaway vacation), I was happy to oblige. The whole point of this trip was to escape the Midwest and to soak up the urban thrill that only a mega-metropolis like L.A. could afford. I am a city boy, always have been and, back then, I told myself I always would be. Today, I think I would feel a little different about such a bold claim. But that shift is likely colored by the fact that I wasn’t particularly fond of L.A. then—nor am I now. There was something about the city that resisted the version of urban life I had imagined for myself: I was drawn to cities as spaces of movement, observation, and aesthetic discovery, yet L.A. often felt to me more like a place to move through than a place to inhabit. *Urban Light* would eventually complicate that distinction.

In hindsight, it is with very little surprise that the place was crowded, on Thanksgiving Day, at 9 PM. The installation is mesmerizing but not because of its size or the play of light against the night sky. But rather because the plaza was alive with people, all armed with their phones and cameras. In the span of the two and half hours I spent there, there was not a minute where *Urban Light* was not buzzing with concerned frowns, commands to “strike a pose,” or requests to get out of someone’s shot. Wandering amidst the installation certainly brought forth more anxiety than awe in me, as I stumbled around the installation, incessantly trying to avoid being accosted by or tripping over eager Gen Z Instagrammers while still attempting to immerse myself in the art. Back home, in Europe, I majored in arts in high school, and I was familiar with the basic concepts of public art installations such as this. So, amidst my stumbles, I looked up at the lamp posts, taking in the contrast between the chilly November air and the warm glow. The white-painted pillars formed neat rows of horizontal lines, the symmetry pleasing. Yet, my eye caught small nuances here and there, not all lamp posts were the same, they differed in style, deceptively so as they are all painted the same. Grouped in clusters, the variations became a game for the eye. I felt a small thrill each time I noticed a difference, or perhaps it was nostalgia. These lamp posts reminded me of home, of my

brief obsession with photographing ornate streetlamps in Paris or Venice. In the early 2000s, I was already trying to be edgy by focusing on architectural details, tapping into an artsy side honed during three hormone-fueled years in high school.

Oh yes, I was a wannabe artsy snob back in 2009, certainly still in 2018. I still am today, albeit nuanced differently and (hopefully) with more maturity. I fear that being an academic in the humanities, with my constant quest to figure out the aesthetic intentions of artists in their sometimes-divisive work, has not helped. I find the questions of why people create what they create and how they decide to express that search through specific materiality fascinating. Others do not, as they scoff at modern art's frivolity, this "nonsense" littering the inside and outsides of our museums these days, often adding "I could have done the same and called it art too, if I wanted to." None of this stopped me from slipping from civilian viewer to university professor, delivering brief—but undoubtedly eternal to my listeners—lectures on principles that might deepen their experience of what they're seeing. As the saying goes: you can take the professor out of the classroom, but you can't take the classroom out of the professor.

Back in downtown L.A., I am making my way through these rows of lamp posts, appreciating the spatial organization of angles, lines, contrasts of shapes and shades.

"What are you doing?" my friend beckoned, interrupting me in my aesthetic experience reverie. I looked at him and around, as if it was the first time I realized I am in public. I assume I looked like a hypnotized tourist, too busy looking up at the sky to pay attention to the huddled groups of picture-takers and their models. Annoyed by the interruption—not the first of its kind, we had a similar interaction a few days ago at the Grand Canyon—I decided that the best vantage point was being at the sidelines. There are little walls demarking this walk-in art experience and as such, it offered me a tranquil platform, almost a haven, from which to observe the piece without getting myself involved in the "show." As I sat there, like a ten-year old child, kicking the heels of my feet against the wall, in a soothing rocking rhythm, my academic brain started percolating as the experience of steeping into *Urban Light* unfolded in front of me, about a yard away, to be enjoyed in its totality. What started as tourist indulgence was quietly becoming a research field trip.

For the best part of my doctoral studies, I focused on performative identities in urban spaces, which is fancy talk for studying dandies and how they strut around on the street. I first got interested in that topic because I was fascinated with my friend's obsession to document everything: where he had been, what he wore, what places he tagged in his pictures, and how it would look online. And for that, only the top spots would do. The desire to be seen, liked, remembered—these were not private ambitions anymore but cultural imperatives. It wasn't just about going places—it was about ranking them. Urban spaces became stages. The more visually striking the set, the better the chance of gaining attention. Instagram isn't just a digital scrapbook; it's a filter for experience. If a location can't be captured well, it risks being forgotten entirely.

As I sat on the wall, I watched the crowd wax and wane within *Urban Light*, almost rhythmically to the grunts and appreciative noises my travel companion is making as he is reviewing the pictures he took. I am not paying much attention to him, I don't quite understand all the camera buttons he frantically clicks to adjust light balance,

comparing and contrasting two pictures that were taken mere seconds apart. “That one is blurry, tsk tsk tsk...” He is an amateur photographer, albeit with a serious eye and he had indulged in a series of high-performing cameras and lenses. Naturally, he brought them on our Thanksgiving road trip from Las Vegas to L.A., and he had an eye for detail. As Susan Sontag writes, “To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed” (2). But here, the camera didn’t just claim—it constructed. His skill reminded me that it’s not only the place that matters, but also the framing. The lens doesn’t merely record; it composes. It tells us what to look at, what to feel. *Urban Light*, in that moment, ceased to be an artwork and became a backdrop—a prop in service of self-branding.

And then I saw her. She unwrapped herself from her black overcoat and revealed a flowy red dress, satiny, a bright splash of color in this sea of people. With a head flip, she posed beside a lamp post and stared down a man. Ah, she has a professional audience, a young man who is getting to work as soon as she put her arm across her abdomen. I elbowed my friend, pointing at her with my chin: “Oh, wow, she certainly came prepared for this.” I am truly amazed at how organized this team is: model and photographer alike seemed to be operating with laser focus, shifting positions, discussing angles. “Well, yeah, that is the point of coming here.” I can feel the testy jab in my friend’s voice. Suddenly, it all clicked. Hours earlier, he had agonized over his own outfit, harping over what to wear, what would be the best pant-to-shirt color contrasting, fussing with his hair while I was sitting diligently on the bed, waiting to leave our hotel room. I look at my beat-up sneakers, a pair of black-and-white Nikes. I first bought that pair in 2017 for my trip to Machu Picchu. Now, erasing that memory, dust from the Grand Canyon clung to the soles instead. I found myself thinking about the difference between our two ways of entering the space. My friend had dressed for *Urban Light*, anticipating how he would appear within it; I had arrived carrying other places with me. The shoes were weathered, dusty, loyal, and every scrape and stain was a remnant of a past place: red dust from Arizona, a smudge from a rainy Brussels alleyway, the frayed edge from Incan stones in Peru. These remnants didn’t just travel with me; they framed how I moved through new spaces. They made me sensitive to terrain, to texture, to the symbolic weight of stepping into another city. Perhaps that’s the real residue of travel—not just what you see, but how the past rescripts the present under your feet.

There I was, perched on a little wall, replaying theories of space and social practice in my head. Walter Benjamin, Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau, or Edward Soja, these names which I had started making my own during my doctoral research were looming large in my internal monologue. One at a time, my inner mind’s eye latches on seminal quotes that stuck with me as I am observing Burden’s work, applying theoretical frameworks to prove my budding academic observation on being a participant in *Urban Light*. Lefebvre once wrote, “(Social) space is a (social) product” (26). De Certeau argued, “Space is a practiced place” (117). These frameworks gave shape to what I was witnessing: a public art installation repurposed as a personal photoshoot studio. The same process was unfolding around me. The woman in the red dress was not simply standing beside *Urban Light*; she and her photographer were negotiating the space between them. She adjusted her body, he adjusted his position, they discussed angles, and each new photograph became a test of whether the space had been successfully transformed into an image. Other visitors were doing something similar, sometimes waiting for a clear

frame, sometimes asking strangers to move, sometimes positioning themselves beneath a particular lamp post because it produced the desired composition. The installation was therefore not merely a backdrop for individual performances. It was organizing a series of social interactions among performers, photographers, tourists, and observers. This is what I began to understand through Baudrillard's formulation of spectacle: the image does not simply represent a social relationship; it can become the medium through which that relationship is organized. At *Urban Light*, people were interacting with one another through the production of images. They were deciding how to pose, how to frame one another, what version of themselves to present, and how the artwork could make that presentation more compelling. The art remained physically present, but the social activity surrounding it increasingly revolved around what could be produced from its image. I, too, had posed, indulging in the performance, creating memories with the help of a visual prop. That was after all the reason why my friend had dragged me here, to encapsulate this postmodern need to catalog all the sights as it were, checking off the big hit items on our list and make lasting memories.

Coming to *Urban Light* was not on my list but I am a good travel companion, and I tagged along, not asking many questions as I was shoved into an Uber and taken away to an undeclared destination. I can see the appeal of Burden's work as a backdrop for people who want to stand out from the rest of the masses online. Why do we behave the way we do in public art spaces? To achieve what aesthetic or existential outcome? These questions haunted me. Art, I once believed, should be enjoyed privately, stored away in thought. But maybe art has become as public as our digital personas. Maybe that's the shift: from contemplation to performance. I was tempted to retroactively apply Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* to what I saw. That temptation was what we call in academia a *déformation professionnelle*—a professional distortion. But these theoretical tools still helped me make sense of it all.

Critically studying and articulating dandyism as the art of self-display and transforming any space (private or public) into a stage, my experience and observations at *Urban Light* take different shapes today than they did back in 2018. Years of thinking about performance, identity, and the ways we continually construct and reconstruct ourselves have made me more attentive to the instability of those categories. That is after all what Deleuze means by "becoming": not a fixed identity, but the continual process through which we negotiate who we are in relation to the spaces and people around us. Today, revisiting my *Urban Light* experience, I am reminded of Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*. Undoubtedly, back in 2018 when I engaged in Benjaminian *flânerie*, I was a "deliberately aimless pedestrian, unencumbered by any obligation or sense of urgency" (Skinner 1). My slow meander through Burden's plaza, observing rather than participating, reflected that identity. Benjamin's *flâneur* is not simply someone who walks through a city; the figure represents a particular mode of urban observation, one in which the pedestrian becomes both participant and detached observer. The dandy, by contrast, is defined through visibility: rather than disappearing into the crowd, the dandy cultivates distinction and makes the self into an aesthetic object. In that sense, the two figures occupy an intriguing tension. The *flâneur* observes the spectacle of the city, while the dandy participates in the spectacle of the self. My first observations as a *flâneur* confirmed the growing pains that exist towards hollowed-out platitudes for which our

society is opting more and more. But where were the other *flâneurs*, fading into the surroundings and the masses, taking in what was unfolding around them like me? Is that even the proper term anymore? The term itself is not displeasing, but it does rub me against the grain a tad. I always thought of myself more of a dandy, someone who refuses “to merge with the crowd,” as Ellen Moers and Deborah C. Parsons argued (Moers, cited in Parsons 20). So which was I? *Flâneur* or dandy? My curated self—expressed in fashion and posture on campus—was nowhere to be seen in L.A. Instead, I had become a passive observer, content to melt into the sidelines.

As such, in the following years as I was discussing my *Urban Light* experience, I was unable to reconcile my inner nature and philosophy of a dandy with the canonical definition of Benjamin’s *flâneur* if it meant that I had to be solely an urban spectator and investigator of the city, that is, melt in the crowd when modern culture urged me to behave like a dandy instead. Begrudgingly agreeing with the proverbial “hindsight is 20/20,” I have to conclude that my behavior back then was not an absolute, despite my many efforts to live my most authentic life, as it is the dandy’s credo. Well, that is not quite true: it is my curated and (very loose) interpretation of what Baudelaire meant when he wrote that the dandy must “aspire to be sublime without interruption; he must live and sleep before a mirror” (101). How then, could I come to terms with the reality that I was not being a “good” dandy in L.A., and only a *flâneur*, as if that was the worst kind of ontological demotion that nobody but me would quite possibly understand? 2025-me sighs as I write about 2018-me. Why did that distinction matter so much? Why was I so determined to categorize my actions and aesthetic responses to this place? How was my passive enjoyment of *Urban Light* at odds with my desire to stand out as the young, fashionably distinguished European professor on campus for example? Wasn’t the point of vacation to blend in a little?

Going to *Urban Light* is as touristy as it gets, and I wasn’t above it. As Christopher Hawthorne noted, “Titled *Urban Light*, the piece is a kind of pop temple, deftly straddling the lines between art and architecture and between seriousness and irony.” A sly smile parts my lips as I continue to reminisce. I have found my conclusion, the one line that ties it all together, the line I was waiting for, ever since I started writing: When place becomes prop, something shifts—not just in how we see the world, but in how we see ourselves within it. Perhaps in our age of performative obsession, where every gesture is documented and every opinion amplified, the most radical act is not to be seen, but to see.

In today’s culture, where YouTube stars, Instagram influencers, and even nostalgic bloggers jockey for attention, everyone believes they deserve the spotlight. Expressing your opinion has become just as important as, if not more than, letting connoisseurs share their expertise with their audience, creating a whirlpool of voices drowning each other. But perhaps, to truly stand out, one must recede—into the margins, into the dark. I am thinking back to 2018-me, sitting on the wall, letting people stroll past him, looking, taking their actions in, like a curiosity. Much like Benjamin must have felt when he worked on the philosophical musings of the Parisian Arcades, sifting through experiences and then observing people going through the same motions we did, mere moments ago. It takes a certain mindset to realize you have been an unwilling participant in a larger performance. I remembered Guy Debord’s insight that society itself is a

spectacle—but knowing this on an intellectual level is one thing, feeling it in your bones is another. For Debord, spectacle is not simply a collection of attractive images; it describes a social order in which relationships increasingly take place through representations. At *Urban Light*, the photographs being produced were not incidental souvenirs of an experience. They were part of the experience itself. People interacted with one another in order to create the image, and the image gave those interactions a value that could extend beyond the physical space. The installation thus became both a place to visit and a resource for producing a publicly recognizable version of oneself.

It is a jarring out-of-body experience in some ways, to move from an affirmative, raw appreciation of your surroundings—a lingering feeling of after-glow from the Grand Canyon visit, no doubt—to the stunning numbness brought upon by the crushing barrage of life in a modern city. Bobby Seal’s discussion of Walter Benjamin’s distinction between *Erfahrung*, “a more positive response [referring] to the mobility, wandering or cruising of the flâneur,” and *Erlebnis*, “[a] shock-induced anaesthesia brought about by the overwhelming sensory bombardment of life in a modern city” helped me articulate that contrast. Loosely translated, both terms can refer to “experience,” but Benjamin distinguishes between an experience that accumulates into something meaningful and lasting and the more immediate, fragmented impressions produced by modern life. My time at the Grand Canyon had felt expansive and immersive; *Urban Light*, despite its beauty, initially felt fractured into flashes, poses, cameras, commands, and images. The contrast made me wonder whether the difference was really between the two places—or between two different ways of experiencing space.

Perhaps that is the paradox of experiencing space today: the moment we enter it, we begin to shape it—even if only by how we choose to move through it, frame it, or record it. *Urban Light* was never meant to be static. It pulses with the energy of its visitors, transforming nightly into a site of ritual and performance. But what I hadn’t expected was that the true experience of that space wasn’t about posing within it but pausing beside it. It was in watching others engage, rehearse, and perform that I began to understand how deeply space is layered with private desire and cultural meaning. Back in 2018, I thought I was witnessing a curious crowd but in truth, I was part of the same choreography. Even in my refusal to pose, I was actively producing meaning—what de Certeau might call a “tactic” of spatial engagement, choosing the margins over the center. I was positioning myself in relation to the space, seeking meaning, contemplating its textures. And that, too, is a kind of performance. The installation invited a choreography, and whether I posed, photographed, or reflected, I was inscribed within it. I was not outside the system. I was its quieter iteration.

To experience a space is not simply to walk through it, but to let it act upon you, and to recognize how you, in turn, act upon it—what Henri Lefebvre called *l’espace vécu*, lived space. It is never neutral. Our presence inscribes values, memories, and hierarchies into its structure, just as space, in turn, shapes our identities, movements, and imaginaries. *Urban Light* becomes a prop not just for the camera, but for our own projections—our aesthetics, insecurities, aspirations, and need for narrative.

And maybe that’s the lasting imprint *Urban Light* left on me. Not just as a prop or a tourist destination, but as a space that turned me, momentarily, into something more

than a visitor: a witness, a thinker, a participant in the quiet theatre of modern life. In that sense, the question isn't whether we perform in public space, but how consciously we do so, and what that performance reveals about the cultural scripts we inhabit. The lights remain. The crowd circulates. But perhaps the real illumination lies in recognizing how space, self, and spectacle are always already entangled.



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