Naked Memory: The Spencer Tunick Experience in the Museum Space

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Abstract

The American artist Spencer Tunick is internationally known for organizing and photographing massive nude gatherings in public spaces, including parks, streets, and squares. His work has generated great controversies regarding the juxtaposition of public space, nudity, and art. Tunick refers to these events as “temporary site-specific installations” (Rosenfeld, 1999). When Tunick started his artistic project in 1992, the installations were performed quickly to avoid confrontations with authority, and involved either individuals or small groups. Since 2001, however, several museums and art institutions around the world, including the Musée d’Art Contemporain de Montréal and the Baltic Center for Contemporary Art in Newcastle, have commissioned Tunick’s installations. Most of these installations have taken place either inside the museum’s facilities or in front of their façades. These have engaged thousands of nude volunteers, who refer to their experience of modeling as nude bodies in public space as, “meaningful, remarkable, memorable, transformative” (Young, 2005, p. 4).
The use of Spencer Tunick’s collective nude installations has transformed the museum space. Considering the public’s profound experience in participating in Tunick’s work, several examples will examine how these transformations mostly occur in the intangible realm of the nude participant’s memory of a cathartic experience within the museum space. These examples will also investigate possible transformations initiated by the museum space in Tunick’s artistic production. The memory of the fleeting construction is also materialized in the final art object: the photograph, which stands as the installation’s official document. Finally, the study analyses how the museum has become the institutional space where the experience provided by Spencer Tunick’s controversial work is legally authorized, in a symbiotic relationship between the artist and the museum.

Introduction

The American artist Spencer Tunick is internationally renowned for organizing and photographing massive nude gatherings in public spaces including streets, parks, and squares¹. The gatherings are difficult to define, for they can be considered simultaneously as body-art, performance, site-specific sculpture, temporary installations, urban intervention, and even political activism. The artist himself frequently refers to his work as “temporary site-specific installations,” (Rosenfeld, 1999) and argues that he is “trying to create flesh architecture” (“In the Studio: Spencer Tunick,” 2006). Gilman (2004) claims that Tunick’s artistic project juxtaposes the intimate and the public sphere. Accordingly, his nude events have generated great controversy in several countries. Nevertheless, hundreds and even thousands of volunteers engage in the installations and despite the nudity, critics have noted that Tunick’s photographs are “more affecting than erotic” (Turner, 1998, p. 90). According to Vine (1995) they reveal the poetic combination of the softness of the human body against the roughness of the urban space.

What could drive so many people to be nude in public, and among strangers? Ward (2001, p. 72) argues that people volunteer for the installations because “Tunick offers ordinary folk the exclusive opportunity to actually become his art”. However, a more evident explanation for the great quantity of volunteers is that participants largely refer to their “experience of modeling as nude bodies in public space (as) meaningful, remarkable, memorable, transformative” (Young, 2005, p.

¹ Images of all installations cited in this paper can be found at www.spencertunick.com and www.essential-architecture.com/tunick/tunick.htm.
4). This is an experience found to be liberating, cathartic, and even therapeutic (Turner, 1998; Murray, 2002). Since 2001, this experience has shifted from the streets to the museum space, as art institutions around the world began commissioning Tunick’s installations. Curiously, the installations are usually arranged to happen in front of museums’ façades or even set inside their facilities, thus juxtaposing the nude intervention with the physical and conceptual space of the institution.

Although many critics have analyzed Tunick’s installations and photographs from an artistic or sociological perspective, none have reflected on the implications of their apparent transition from the streets to a museum setting. The profound experiences of the public that participates in Tunick’s collective nude installations have transformed the museum space. In order to raise possible answers to the questions above, first Spencer Tunick’s artistic trajectory is outlined in light of his association with museums. Secondly, some examples of installations occurred in partnership with art institutions are analyzed. Finally, it is argued that the alliance between Tunick and the museum deeply interfered with both the perception of the museum as public space and the aesthetic characteristics of Spencer Tunick’s artwork.

**From the streets to the museum**

Tunick began documenting nude people in public spaces in 1992, primarily portraying individuals and small groups in New York. During this initial period, the installations were done very quickly, resembling Kaprow’s happenings and other interactive art-performances of the sixties (Fineman, 2008). They were “often conducted like early morning guerrilla raids” (Vine, 1995, p. 122) to avoid confrontations with authority, since the combination of nudity and public space is mostly forbidden and seen as an abnormal practice. Tunick started to draw attention after gathering one-hundred-and-fifty people in an installation at Times Square in 1997, an occasion on which he was also arrested. In fact, between 1994 and 1999, he was arrested five times in New York, under charges of “unlawful assembly, creating a violent act, disorderly conduct, public exposure, and reckless endangerment” (Young, 2005, p. 6). During this period, Tunick undertook a six-month project entitled *Naked States*, in which he photographed nude models, either individually or in groups, in all fifty American states. The project aroused great awareness of his work, and resulted in a traveling exhibition and an HBO documentary.

After two years of fighting in court for the right to make his art on New York streets under the First Amendment, police were finally
forbidden to interfere with Tunick’s public nude installations as long as they were kept underground, unpublicized, and under a hundred participants (Ward 2001). In 2001, after his judicial win, Tunick initiated an international project, *Nude Adrift*, which aimed to execute at least one nude installation in all seven continents. This project was undertaken differently in each location included in the itinerary. In some countries, such as Japan and South Africa, Tunick was literally backpacking with his girlfriend and a small film crew (Ward, 2001). In those places, he did not have any institutional support, and the installations resulted in mostly individual portraits. In other countries, however, Tunick’s installations were possible due to partnerships with museum and art organizations such as the Musée d’Art Contemporain, in Montréal, and the Melbourne Fringe Festival, which provided Tunick with funding and structure. In those countries, the installations surpassed all expectations, gathering two thousand volunteers in Montréal, and over four thousand in Melbourne.

Montréal, which was *Nude Adrift*’s first destination, was clearly a watershed event in Tunick’s artistic trajectory. To begin with, it was his first international installation after winning the case against the city of New York. Secondly, it was the first time he was undertaking a project in such close partnership with a large institution. Finally, it was by far the largest installation to that date. From that point forward, Tunick’s installations grew larger and more ambitious (Fineman, 2008), involving more and more people. At the same pace, several museums and cultural institutions began commissioning Tunick’s installations. In fact, a close examination of Tunick’s body of work reveals that, after 2001, the vast majority of the installations were indeed carried out under the commission of museums and art organizations worldwide. Accordingly, these installations were (and still are) often organized to include the museums’ façade, incorporating the museums’ architectural aspects as part of the installation. Without having to rush the work to run from the police, Tunick now commands the nude masses with a megaphone and the help of translators and assistants, while police officers and barricades protect the area and the participants instead of arresting them. Moreover, after realizing a large outdoor installation, usually smaller and more private installations are also organized inside the museums. Set against this backdrop, what was

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3 Curiously, in Russia, though he did not have official support from the museums, the curator of the Russian Museum, and the curator of the Froid’s Dream Museum themselves volunteered to be Tunick’s models (Nelson, 2002).

4 The project *Nude Adrift* also became a traveling exhibition and another HBO documentary entitled *Naked World*.

5 Examples of the many institutions that have commissioned Tunick installations, and that are not mentioned in this paper, are the Saatchi Gallery in London (2003), the Cleveland Museum of Contemporary Art (2004), the Baltic Center for Contemporary Art in Newcastle (2005), the Lyon Biennale (2005), the Fundació COFF in San Sebastian (2006), the Caracas Museum of Contemporary Art (2006), and the Dream Amsterdam Foundation (2007).
once an unlawful artistic expression in public spaces is validated under the museum’s umbrella, in which “the apparent obviousness of the transgression (public nudity) becomes an authorized aspect of the artistic production” (Young, 2005, p.8). Taking this statement into consideration in addition to the fact that Tunick’s juxtaposition of the intimate and public spheres is quite often taking place within the museum space, the following question emerges: how have these massive nude installations interfered with the notions of museums as public spaces? Moreover, has the museum space transformed Spencer Tunick’s artwork?

**Under the museum’s umbrella**

Before suggesting possible answers to the questions posed above, some of Tunick’s installations will be highlighted within the museum context. The 25th São Paulo Biennale, in 2002, was the first important international art event in which Tunick was invited to participate. His inclusion in a Biennale largely influenced how the art community approached his work at that time (Nelson, 2002). The installation happened a week after the Biennale’s official opening, which, in addition to promoting the event, also exhibited seven of Tunick’s photographs. About one thousand Brazilians engaged in three installations that occurred in the Biennale’s parking lot, in front of the Biennale Foundation building — one of the city’s architectural symbols located inside of São Paulo’s largest and most frequented public park. Contrasting with the one thousand nude participants, approximately two thousand clothed onlookers came to watch the event, which was widely publicized in the media, causing a great deal of sensationalism. Despite this fact, participants described the experience as pacific, harmonious, and natural (“Nu Artístico”, 2002). As one of them, walking nude with a thousand other people in the middle of the Ibirapuera Park was the most immediate feeling of humanity that this author has ever felt.

Following the outdoor event, two installations were organized inside the Biennale’s building, in which Tunick allowed only one hundred people to participate. These installations were executed privately, while the Biennale was closed to spectators and general public. Thus, having fewer people and no outside interference, Tunick had complete control over the installation. For instance, in the first installation, he organized the volunteers according to the tonality of their skin, positioning those with darker skinned at the front, and sending participants with lighter skin to the back. In this installation I was sent all the way to the back. In the second installation, only dark skinned people were allowed to participate and along with approximately thirty other volunteers, and the author was excluded for being too white.

After the São Paulo Biennale, Tunick nd his exhibition headed to Chile, to the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo in Santiago. His installation caused great controversy in Chile, a conservative country severely wounded by years
of oppression under a military regime. Before Tunick’s arrival, a group of lawyers tried to legally forbid the installation from happening, however, Chile’s Supreme Court declared the suit invalid (“Tunick en Chile”, 2003). In addition, approximately six hundred Evangelicals protested in front of Tunick’s hotel accusing him of immorality. Due to the controversy, Tunick’s first choice of location, the Plaza de la Constitución, was denied and the government authorized the installation to be reallocated to the Museo de Bellas Artes façade (“Tunick en Chile”, 2003). Apparently, the museum’s façade would confer the artistic value needed to legalize the operation in the face of the conservative groups. The controversy spread nation-wide, leading Tunick and the Museum to believe that very few people would engage in the installation. Nevertheless, despite all protests, about five thousand people showed up, overwhelming all expectations. The installation became one large celebration of freedom, which was described by local newspapers as an event without precedent in the history of Chile (“Spencer Tunick en Chile”, 2002). While waiting for Tunick’s commands, the nude mass sang Chile’s national anthem, and euphorically hoisted Chile’s flag (“Spencer Tunick en MAC”, 2002). Ultimately, the Chileans appropriated Tunick’s installation for themselves, since to be naked in a public space carried a strong implication of political and personal freedom (“Chile’s Man of the Year”, 2003). This declaration of freedom coincided with a “wave of free speech and expression that has swept the country since the end of the Pinochet dictatorship” (“Chile’s Man of the Year”, 2003). Hence, the opportunity to stand naked in public functioned, for the Chileans, as a symbolic emancipatory act.

A different situation took place in Düsseldorf during the 2006 ArtCity Quadriennale. Supported by the Kunsts Palast Museum, Tunick created several installations in the museum’s courtyard and two installations inside the museum’s building. The indoor installations occured in the “Rubens Room”, in front of the Venus and Adonis painting. Although the outdoor installations had a massive press presence, the indoor ones were done privately, and the museum remained closed to the general public for the entire day. In addition, only fifty people were invited to partake in the indoor installations, and participation was restricted to people between eighteen and twenty nine years.

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6 There was so much commotion when the volunteers arrived that the installation was almost canceled due to the lack of organizational structure and the logistics of handling an unexpected amount of people. Fearing that canceling the event would lead to an angry mob that could break into the museum and destroy the art pieces, the museum’s director decided to carry on with the installation. (“Spencer Tunick en MAC”, 2002).

7 The installation took place in a public square adjacent to the Presidential Palace, a fact that further contributes to the political weight of this act.

8 The event had such a large impact in Chile that Tunick was named Chile’s 2003 Man of The Year, a “prestigious accolade usually reserved for political or business leaders” (“Chile’s Man of the Year”, 2003). Furthermore, on the day Tunick left the country, someone changed the names of the street-signs at the intersection where the installation occurred to “Freedom Street” and “Spencer Tunick Street” (“Spencer Tunick en MAC”, 2002).
Postings at The Tunick Experience website demonstrate the frustration of older participants; in particular older women found the decision to be prejudicial. These individuals expressed a sense of betrayal, as many had overcome personal and social barriers to expose their aged bodies in Tunick’s installations in the courtyard, but were denied further participation in the indoor installations for being too old.

Finally, in May 2007, supported by the Museo Universitario de Ciencias y Artes, eighteen thousand people stood nude for Tunick in Zócalo Plaza, in Mexico City. Zócalo is considered one of the larger squares in the world, and is surrounded by a Cathedral, the City Hall, and the National Palace, which is the main government office. Curiously, a no-fly zone was declared above the plaza during the installation (Sarmiento, 2007). Tunick’s request to make an installation at the Teotihuacán pyramids was denied by the government (Sarmiento, 2007). Although not officially stated, it is possible to assert that, by denying this request, the government was trying to avoid possible controversy in allowing mass nudity in an ancient sacred place. A few days after the main installation at Zócalo, Tunick invited fifty black-haired women to participate in an installation inside the Frida Kahlo Museum, in homage to the Mexican artist. He asked the ladies to braid their hair resembling the style used by Frida, and also to paint their eyebrows imitating Kahlo’s signature eyebrows (Lagunas, 2007). Similarly to the previous museum indoor installations, no audience or press was permitted, and the museum remained closed to the general public.

**A symbiotic relationship**

The examples above demonstrate how a symbiotic relationship has been established between the artist and museum institutional sphere. On the one hand, museums and art institutions provide Tunick with a solid structure and organization, since museums handle all travel, logistics, legal permits, and negotiations with local governments. Museums also guarantee safety and security, ensuring police protection for Tunick and the participants. Furthermore, museums provide all the necessary funding, which may be private or public, depending on the nature of the institution. Additionally, by allying with museums, Tunick guarantees a large number of volunteers and great media exposure through the museum’s press office, official website, and printed material. The installations usually happen connected to an exhibition, which enhances the artist’s curriculum; and finally, and most importantly, under the museum’s umbrella, Tunick’s controversial artwork is authorized and validated as art.

On the other hand, by hosting the installations, museums obtain great international mass media exposure, including newspapers front pages and prime time television news, a kind of media coverage that museums rarely enjoy. By bringing Tunick to the city and arousing discussions regarding art, public space, and nudity, museums attract young and diverse visitors to the installation and to the exhibition.
Additionally, by connecting themselves to a contemporary artistic trend, museums renovate their public image and include the institution into the international artistic scenario (“Spencer Tunick en Chile”, 2002). Finally, the institution ends up with its signature architecture eternalized and as part of an art object, since the museums architectural features become part of the subject of the photographic image. Moreover, the official titles of all photographs carry the name of the place and the funding institution, for example: Newcastle Gateshead 7 (BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art) 2005, or Venezuela 3 (Caracas Museum of Contemporary Art) 2006. It is not often that museums have the opportunity to be included in the title of an art piece.

As a result of this symbiotic relationship between Tunick and the museums, three types of scenarios can be observed functioning as the installations’ location, each of them with different implications for what we can consider to be the museum’s public space. In the first scenario, the installation is undertaken in front of the museum’s façade or its nearby areas. In this case, the museum’s physical and public space becomes the space in which it is possible for Tunick’s art to exist. Hence, the museum becomes a space for democratic art participation, since engaging in those types of installations is free of admission, and open to all society with no restriction of age, race, gender, religion, financial, or physical condition. Such approach is aligned with Barucha’s (2007) assertion that through participative performances “museums have become extensions of public space, ostensibly open to the democratic incursions and participation of ordinary people, rather than insulated ‘white cubes’ monopolized by a coterie of selected viewers and connoisseurs” (p.412).

The second scenario, however, poses the opposite situation. When the installations occur within the museum walls, they happen in the realm of the private sphere. The museum remains closed for the general public, there are no spectators to the installations, with photographs as the only channel of public engagement. Most importantly, museums’ indoor installations are usually not open to democratic participation, given that the artist may limit public engagement according to characteristics of their body – such as skin tonality in São Paulo, 2002; age in Düsseldorf, 2006; and gender in Mexico City, 2007 – in order to construct and photograph the installation he has envisioned.

Finally, the third scenario is established when the museum’s institutional authority manages to authorize other city spaces to be used as installations’ locations, such as public parks, streets, and squares. This practice can be interpreted under Danto’s (1998) argument that by promoting art in public spaces, the museum colonizes the public space in the name of the museum. In other words, this is the museum expanding its walls, or the “musealization” of the public space. Consequently, the execution of the installations in these public spaces creates great interference in the city’s life, since several streets are blocked and pedestrians are
prevented from entering the area unless they engage in the event. The everyday use of particular spaces is interrupted so the installation can exist. This interference in the public space reached its most extreme in Mexico, with the establishment of the no-fly zone over the installation area.

The intangible transformation of space

The discussion of these considerations warrants a return to the initial question regarding the manner in which Tunick’s installations and the museum space are mutually transformed by this relationship. A 'before and after' photo comparison of one of the sites used as Tunick’s installation, for example the Sao Paulo Biennale’s parking lot, illustrates the lack of physical transformation in the space caused by the installation. The place was changed only momentarily, but returned to its original state after the installation. Despite this, three types of transformation occur in the museum space as a consequence of the installations. The first can be identified as a temporary physical transformation, in which an ocean of nude bodies intertwines with the museum or urban setting and lasts for the time that the installation is held. The second transformation occurs in the final art object resulting from the installation: the photograph, which eternalizes the temporary transformation of the museum space. Moreover, the photograph depicting such transformation integrates exhibitions, catalogues, and has high commercial value in the market, helping to disseminate the museum’s transformed view.

Finally, the third and strongest type of space transformation is what can be called the 'intangible transformation of space', which occurs exclusively in the intangible realm of the nude participants’ intense experience. As a participant, the author can assert that the Biennale parking lot will forever conjure the emotional connection forged by the profound experience of being nude with one thousand people in that place. Consequently, the museum space is conceptually transformed as a subjective and individual memory. In Chile, the scale of this transformation was extreme, having occurred collectively and in the symbolic realm of political perception.

Similarly, it is also possible to observe several transformations occurring in Tunick’s artwork as a consequence of the museum structure. For instance, the spontaneity of the installation as an urban intervention is being eliminated, for the majority of installations are executed within an organized structure, and limited to the boundaries of an authorized perimeter. Such a structure, on the one hand, enables the artist to gain more control over the installation and its aesthetic outcome. Tunick has more power to arrange the installation at his will, and achieve his artistic visions without disruption from the police or other interferences. On the other hand, with more control over the installation Tunick has more control over its volunteers, limiting their participation by age, gender, and skin color, employing people in his installations as he would employ paint on a canvas. In other words, although these limitations empower
Tunick’s aesthetic achievements, such restrictions diminish democratic participation at the same time that they reduce the sustainability of difference among the volunteers. By doing this, the artist is conferring more importance to the installations’ outcome — the photograph — rather than into the installation as an opportunity for a true liberating experience for its participants. Furthermore, a progression towards an aesthetic formality can also be noticed in installations in which Tunick requests the nude crowd to execute the same position. Such installations, with recognizable patterns, led critics to argue that the images “communicate a message of mass conformity and compliance” resembling “Leni Riefenstahl’s shots of German athletes performing calisthenics en mass at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin” (Fineman, 2008). Furthermore, the installations have become an exclusive event for the participants and organizers, eliminating the public as spectators to the installation, especially in the indoor sites; a type of location that has been increasing in frequency in Tunick’s practice. Finally, a repetitive and somewhat exhausting modus operandi can be seen in Tunick’s body of work, which might reduce the installations to a “photograph of a naked crowd in front of a museum.”

Hilde Hein (2006, p. 23) identifies the museum “as an institution that is both public and private”. She also asserts “whoever visits a museum enters a public space in the company of unknown individuals, each of whom undergoes a uniquely private experience” (2006, p. 23). Hein’s perception is taken to its extreme if applied to Tunick’s artwork within the museum context, in which for the moment of the installation the public and private spheres are merged into the participant’s experience, individually as well as collectively. The museum has become the institutional space where the experiences provided by Spencer Tunick’s controversial work is authorized and validated in a symbiotic relationship between the artist and the museum. As suggested, this symbiotic relation generated impacts on the aesthetic and practical characteristics of Tunick’s work, as well as on how the museum's physical and conceptual space is perceived within the nude participants’ intense experience. All this being said, it is possible to ask how long this relationship will remain manageable and visually exciting in the face of the danger of repetition and sameness. It will be interesting to observe how both Spencer Tunick and museums will — or will not — sustain such a relationship in order to renew their images and their practices.
References


