

"...artists grow weary of neglecting their everyday realities in the hope of achieving...art market success... Prevailing ideas about art and culture at numerous academies and art schools are still based upon the concept of originality and uniqueness of art - art in service of representation and not of society. And there is a widespread lack of recognition of the fact that, in an entirely mediated environment, new and different complex requirements are imposed upon artistic productions and thus upon their producers"

- Ute Meta Bauer

It's just the old con - with the parting on the other side.

7th February & 6th April 2007 ©David Patten

"...the social and personal disintegration wrought by our administrative society, which dominates by dividing and then homogenizing under its bureaucratic forms."

- Richard Shusterman: *'Pragmatist Aesthetics'*

"The Arts Council is committed to widening and deepening public engagement with the arts and to becoming more accountable for how we spend public money. The arts debate is helping us to better understand public aspirations for the arts, and how they can be balanced with the needs of artists and arts organisations. By opening up the debate in this way we may create some entirely new possibilities for the arts in England."

Public art - are we being conned?

"Public art is difficult territory, for commissioners, artists and members of the public alike..." [Arts Council England: 'Arts Debate']

Perhaps it is easier to say what it isn't - it isn't 'community arts' and nor is it 'gallery art'. It is something else. Something that holds the commitment to 'public' in absolute balance with the possibilities and potential of 'art'. And that we commit 'art' to 'public' is really important. Arts Council England in its introduction to these debates commits itself to 'public aspirations' and 'public discussion'. Editorial Intelligence, represented on the Advisory Panel for these debates, also emphasises the importance of 'public opinion' and 'public policy'. Obviously we all recognise and understand that 'public' is important.

So maybe it is the 'art' bit of the equation that makes for difficult territory and murky waters. And maybe this is because we get off on the wrong foot - we assume that public art is like gallery art when in reality it is more like other things.

When it does step outdoors, gallery art (usually promoted as 'art in public spaces') rarely meshes well with 'public' ("...a sense of being laughed at or 'conned' by the arts establishment"). If, though, we start thinking in terms of an 'art of making places public' we begin to think and act in more inventive ways. And there's nothing holding us back from being more inventive - just a reluctance to let go of old ways of thinking.

As Patricia Philips (1) has said, "As the texture and context of public life changes...public art must reach for new articulations and new expectations...a comprehension of value based on ideas and content rather than on lasting forms - a flexibility of procedures for making and placing art, and a more inventive and attentive critical process."

Public Art South West and Ixia are both important to developing "attentive critical practice" - and I'm naive enough to believe that the purpose of this debate is to raise the level of public funding to developing this essential public art infrastructure.

The painter Ad Reinhardt cautioned us to "Watch out for armpits", and we should! The provocation text that opens this debate is so full of armpits that it is unlikely to encourage intelligent debate.

Of course the 'local' doesn't compromise "the ability to take risks and produce innovate (sic) work" - after all, all art is local. And the gallery is not "the artist's space" - that's just nonsense. And nor is this debate polarised between artist and public or process and product. This whole thing is much more subtle and smarter than that.

"Watch out for armpits."

1. Patricia Philips in 'Critical Issues in Public Art', Senie & Webster 1992