

PUBLIC ART IS...

"The city has all the design it needs. For another category – 'public art' – to have a function in the design of city spaces, 'art' has to be brought back to one of its root meanings: 'cunning'. Public art has to squeeze in and fit under and fall over what already exists in the city. Its mode of behaviour is to perform operations – what appear to be unnecessary operations – on the built environment: it adds to the vertical, subtracts from the horizontal, multiplies and divides the network of in-between lines. The function of public art is to de-design."

[Acconci]

Public art is not an art form - it is not like painting or sculpture or architecture or landscape architecture.

"Public art is a principle. A principle of improving the changing environment through the arts. Public art is not an art form; it utilises the arts to assist those involved in increasing the quality of the environment."

[ixia]

Patricia Philips describes public art as being "about the free field, the play of creative vision". Of course, this could be understood as no more than indulgences or irrelevancies. At its best, though, public art can achieve great things and make significant contributions to built environment programmes.

Public art can function like a wormhole through the often over technical requirements of procuring buildings and places. It can make useful connections between policy imperatives, for example connecting the opportunities for social and cultural revitalisation to physical and economic regeneration agendas. It can extend the scale spectrum of development, working as well at 1:1 as it can at, say, 1:1250. Public art can recapture narrative and site histories to reveal new content. It can explore issues, contest positions, provide comment [Philips]. Public art can inhabit both real and virtual space. And more prosaically, public art can attract investment, brand new development, provide a market edge [Bianchini et al].

It is as difficult to say what public art does as it is to say what it is, other than to recognise the dynamic of the free field.

Some commentators [Miles] suggest that public art can be understood as four types of activity:

1. art placed outdoors as an expression of the civic;
2. art as material seepage beyond the art gallery as permanent installation or temporary intervention in public space;
3. art (and craft) integrated with urban design (street furniture, etc), or buildings (decoration – "the lipstick on the gorilla" Dormer 1992), or landscape (ie, a feature);
4. art that exposes public, social, or community issues.

There is a danger in this convenient listing of activity types – the danger being that it misses the point. It misses the point of public art as 'free field' [Philips] or 'the mind of don't know' [Jacobs].

SITE & PLACE

It might be useful at this point to consider public art in terms of site and place – ie. the territories that public art shares in common with architecture, landscape architecture and

urban design. And from this, open up consideration of notions of 'emergence' and 'event-ness' and 'wormholes' as possible cross-cutting motivations or approaches for a broad range of public art practice.

The American critic, Jeff Kelley, has proposed distinctions between 'artists of site' and 'artists of place', and these are useful in framing key approaches to public art.

For Kelley "a site represents the constituent properties of a place – its mass, space, light, duration, location and material processes... a place represents the practical, vernacular, psychological, social, cultural, cerebral, ethnic, economic, political and historical dimensions of a site. Sites are like frameworks. Places are what fill them out and make them work. Sites are like maps...while places are the reservoirs of human content... A site feeds out of itself and a place feeds in. A place is useful and a site is used... Places are held in place by personal and common values, and by the maintenance of these over time... As remembered, places are thus conserved, while sites, the forgotten places, are exploited."

We can debate the rights and wrongs of this text, but its usefulness is in how Kelley then applies it to the work of artists.

"A place comes into art loaded with content. An artist comes to a place in one of two ways: either loaded with content or like a clean slate, ready to receive, interpret and represent what is already there. If the former, an artist will displace the resident meanings of a place with his preconceptions about art. If the latter, she will make those meanings visible as if for the first time. In so doing, she may also make something that bears little resemblance to art; it may look like beach furniture, feel like a walking tour, read like an ethnic community library, sound like oral history, pass by like a parade or be organised like a photography competition. Having been made by an artist, though, it will be none of those things alone."

In terms of providing a clue as to the strategies of artists, Kelley echoes Cindy Sherman's suggestion that artist should "Do your own work, but use someone else's clothes." Kelley suggests:

"In place, artists engage meanings that may have nothing to do with art, but which are framed, proposed or clarified [as art] in the engagement. Like archaeologists, artists of place excavate the accumulated history and character of a place; like anthropologists, they study the institutions, myths and customs that characterise a place; like psychotherapists, they unlock the unconscious assumptions and forgotten secrets that keep a place's histories and intentions hidden from public view; like witches or magicians, they invoke the rhythms and spirits of a place; like sociologists, they measure the social systems that give a place its power; and like social activists, artists of place confront the rhetorics of exclusion and power that keep certain places off limits to dissenting voices..."

NOTE: STRATEGIES FOR SECOND STUDY AREA VISIT

Re-visit the study area as:

- an archaeologist
- a census enumerator
- a headline writer
- a herbalist
- a litter collector/street cleaner
- a psychogeographer
- a souvenir collector
- a victim or a predator
- etc.. ADD MORE

"Understanding something in just one way is a rather fragile kind of understanding. ...you need to understand something [in] at least two different ways in order to really understand it. Each way of thinking about something strengthens and deepens each of the other ways of

thinking about it. Understanding something in several different ways produces an overall understanding that is richer and of a different nature than any one way of understanding.”

[Resnick, Mitchell. 'Turtles, Termites and Traffic Jams: Explorations in Massively Parallel Microworlds'. Cambridge, Mass., and London: MIT Press 1999]

SEMINAR CONTENT – Emergence, Event-ness and Wormholes

Interrogate the following to identify strategies and approaches that may frame public art approaches to the study area.

TEXT #1 – EMERGENCE

[Johnson, Steven. 'Emergence – The Connected Lives of Ants, Brains, Cities and Software'. Penguin Books 2001]

“If you’re building a system designed to learn from the ground level, a system where marco intelligence and adaptability derive from local knowledge, there are five fundamental principles you need to follow...

1. More is different.
2. Ignorance is useful.
3. Encourage random encounters.
4. look for patterns in the signs.
5. Pay attention to your neighbours.

NOTE: see book for full descriptors pp78 & 79.

TEXT #2 – EVENT-NESS

[Comrie, Bernard. 'Aspect: An Introduction to the Study of Verbal Aspect and Related Problems'. Cambridge University Press 1976, p. 13]

“... a situation may be either a state, or an event, or a process. ... states are static, i.e. continue as before unless changed, whereas events and processes are dynamic, i.e. require a continual input of energy if they are not to come to an end; events are dynamic situations viewed as a complete whole (perfectively), whereas processes are dynamic situations viewed in progress, from within (imperfectively).”

TEXT #3 - WORMHOLES

[From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia]

The name "wormhole" comes from the following analogy used to explain the phenomenon: imagine that the universe is the skin of an apple, and a worm is travelling over its surface. The distance from one side of the apple to the other is equal to half the apple's circumference if the worm stays on the apple's surface, but if it instead burrows a wormhole directly through the apple the distance it has to travel is considerably less.

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