

ixia

ixia is the think tank for public art - its aim is to provide an independent and objective view of the factors that affect the quality of artists' work in the public realm by undertaking research and enabling debate.

### An Ordinary Thing

The involvement of artists in development processes should, by now, be common place – it should be an ordinary thing. For nearly 20 years we have committed time, energy and resources to remembering the idea that the artist can make useful contributions to the built environment and public realm. Today, there should be nothing surprising or special about artists doing this sort of work.

And yet, our ways of going on with this are far from ordinary – in fact they are quite the reverse. Everything we say and do to bring artists into play – our strategies and policy imperatives, commissioning tactics, management procedures, and so on – reinforces the idea that artists working in development processes is something that requires specialness of some kind. And, in turn, this specialness encourages separateness, and we all then start again in the firm belief that the involvement of artists in development processes is NOT an ordinary thing.

It's probably time we got this sorted out.

### Artists

Artists are not well placed to participate in development processes. There is little or nothing in the teaching or early years experience of artists that equips them to participate, partner-up, co-operate and/or collaborate. The contemporary artist is still the abbreviation of Alberti's closing out of bigger possibilities. We've learnt nothing. It's a problem!

But is the best way of resolving this problem simply to position mediators between the artist and the development process? Of course it is easy to say that this agency or that curator as commissions manager will deal with the art(ist) – on the one hand it shifts the responsibilities towards art(ist) elsewhere, and on the other it keeps the possibility of the art(ist) at arm's length, at one-removed, from the development process. But this comes with baggage, and it is this baggage that makes for anything but an ordinary thing.

### Agencies

To think again in terms of agencies is to be reactionary. Agencies may be an attractive option to a particular sort of client, the client who simply wants to be done with things. For this sort of client, working through an agency is no different from employing a personal shopper – both make sense to the tick box ticking that pleases little minds.

"A personal shopper will give the customer focused and individual attention, and will advise the customer of what is in fashion, help the customer to decide what looks good on them, or assist in picking out an outfit for a particular occasion – or even an entire wardrobe for a particular season. Personal shopping services typically begin with a request or question from the client about the item, product or service that they are looking for. Customers are typically required to pay for the information. After the personal shopper has located the item or items according to the client's needs, the customer is notified."

Agencies are organisations, they have instrumental agendas that sell other agendas short as a prerequisite for staying in business. They offer access to special things within the catch-all of "memorable branding" "based on visionary strategies and artist selection procedures" that are "culture-led, community-focused and developer driven". They can also offer "poetry and

creative writing, choreography, engineering, design, fashion and film” when these things are in season.

The responsibility of the agency is to itself, it has instrumental ways of going on that paper over the lack of practice or purpose or theory. Its ways of going on are chiffon-clouded and obscure.

## Curators

If we consider the etymological root of the word 'curator' [curatela], we find the definition “the individual that is in charge of the well being of minors and lunatics” [Ruth Estévez]. Do we really believe that artists are lunatics? If we did, we would be foolish and irresponsible in advocating for their involvement in development processes. Just as we wouldn't set out to work with a mentally deranged QS or engineer. Of course, if artists are lunatics it is prudent to employ curators.

But if artists aren't lunatics, what are curators doing in development processes? What are the experiences and skills they bring to the project? How have they learnt these things? And where have they come from? Are they skilled in project management, or geography, or place making, or property development, or environmental sciences, or funding, or construction, or anything that might be useful? If, as is often the case, they come from art and/or design via the gallery, they should come clean and either be the artist or designer or return to the gallery – otherwise it is theft and shenanigans.

## The Early Involvement

We have all signed up to the early involvement of artists in development processes, but advocate for the use of agencies and curators in commissioning artists. This is a contradiction. Or maybe it is just poor thinking.

Whatever it is, we have an obligation to be clear. Either we commit to doing those things (or putting those things in place) that secure the proper early involvement of artists, OR we say that artists are secondary to the specialist agency or curator.

## What To Do

If we go with the early involvement of artists, we have to start doing things differently. And part of that doing things differently requires an initial understanding (“independent and objective view of the factors that affect the quality of artists' work in the public realm by undertaking research and enabling debate” - ixia) of how and where things have become self-defeating.

Equally, if we go back to the specialist agency or curator way of doing things, we need to understand how this can be done without creating cultural elite riding roughshod over local and regional distinctiveness, content and meaning, and, of course, real creative ambition.

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