

PUBLIC ART – INTRODUCTION

"Maybe you think things are okay and that you are doing 'all right'. But someday the monotonous and ugly spaces you live and work in will be organised as intelligently and as beautifully as the spaces have been in some paintings."

[Ad Reinhardt 28th April 1946]

It is becoming common place now for any review of public art in the UK to start with the Arts Council of England in 1988. In truth, though, the Arts Council's percent for art campaign, and its related development of public art agencies were only disruptions in what was already a freeplay of artists in the public realm.

"Context is half the work."

[APG]

To only see things from the position of policy imperatives and funding streams is to miss the bigger picture/context. More dangerously, it is to overlook the motivations that underpin this practice that we are calling public art. Long before the Arts Council intervened in 1988, there was considerable public art practice underway in the UK, Europe and the USA. And this practice differed greatly from the traditional role of the artist/artisan in correspondence with the architect or the civic authority.

In 1967, Irving Sandler, writing in the catalogue for the exhibition 'Sculpture in the Environment', noted:

"If enough artists are enabled to work in public places, a new aesthetic tradition may develop, a tradition of modern public art, different from that of studio art."

[ref. Harding]

For a while, though, this "different from that of studio art" really only meant a certain sort of public art, ie. 'public sculpture' and 'art in public places'. A good example of this in the UK, was the 1972 'City Sculpture Project', funded by the Peter Stuyvesant Foundation, which commissioned sixteen 'public sculptures' for a number of English cities.

The fall out from this early commissioning programme is useful in beginning to frame some of the issues we will be dealing with in due course. One of the commissioned artists commented that "the problem with public sculpture lies with the public, not with the sculpture." And another, "the idea of designing a sculpture for a particular site, even if chosen by oneself, seems to me to be a gross limitation on the artist's freedom of action."

[ref. Harding]

The first of these comments indicates the ongoing tension between notions of 'art' and 'public'. You can see similar problems arising if you were to adopt similar terms for your own practices, terms like 'public architecture', or 'public landscape design', or 'public urban design'. The expectation would always outweigh the reality.

The second comment suggests that the assumption that the art should take a sculptural form is a limitation on the wider possibilities of art/the possible contribution of the artist working in a public situation or context. This is a significant observation, and will run through much of what we go on to discuss.

[NOTE: For a very useful commentary on the 1972 'City Sculpture Project', see Lawrence Alloway, *Studio International*, October 1972, Vol. 184 No. 948.]

TERMS & DEFINITIONS

Before going too much further, it may be useful to explain some of the terms we are using, and, where possible, indicate their definitions.

Our key terms are:

- public sculpture
- art in public places
- public art

PUBLIC SCULPTURE

We have touched on public sculpture already. And, anyway, you already know what it is. It is usually a lump of metal cluttering up the pavement or public square. It is usually characterised by a rusty complexion and a coating of pigeon droppings. In themselves, these objects are completely harmless. They are ghosts – “The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living”. [To understand the function of these ghosts in today’s city see Kevin Hetherington: ‘Phantasmagoria/ Phantasm Agora: Materialities, Spatialities and Ghosts’].

ART IN PUBLIC PLACES

This one term has led to more confusion and argument than any other over the last twenty years or so. We need to deal with it now so that it can be quickly dismissed from our thinking. One definition is that provided by Public Art Commissions Agency in their 1992 ‘Strategy for Public Art in Cardiff Bay’ (and, indeed, in many similar documents produced by the same organisation). PACA’s definition reads:

“The term ‘public art’ or, more accurately, ‘art in public places’, is necessarily broad and covers any contribution made by visual artists or craftworkers towards achieving the commissioner’s objectives and which is intended to be accessible to the general public. Two complementary definitions of Art in Public Places are:

- artworks created and/or selected specifically for a particular public site;
- artworks created and/or selected for the widest possible public audience and not just ‘gallery-goer’.

Art in Public Places is created by fine artists (sculptors, painters, land artists, etc.) and by craftworkers (smiths, ceramicists, textile designers, potters, etc.) and includes all building- or landscape-related works of art, whether fixed or freestanding, permanent or temporary, within external or internal settings, and covers a wide range of artforms and media.”

In itself, the definition is too broad to be offensive or dangerous, but the basic assumption that putting ‘art’ in ‘public places’ could be a good thing was severely damaged by the controversy surrounding the removal of Richard Serra’s ‘Tilted Arc’ from One Federal Plaza, New York in 1987. This is not the time or place to go into the detail of the events surrounding ‘Tilted Arc’ (a short overview is appended to this paper), but the controversy raised a number of fundamental issues that are still being worked through. These include:

- the role of government funding in commissioning public art;
- the responsibility of commissioning agencies;
- the artist's rights to his or her work, and the nature of authorship in public art;
- the role of the public in determining the value of a work of art.

The fallout from ‘Tilted Arc’ was enormous. Initially artists, commissioners and funders on both sides of the Atlantic were shocked into an obsession with railings and seating – all those things that

Patricia Philips has summarised as 'amenity, embellishment or camouflage'. The next time you walk through Birmingham city centre, or, indeed, through some of its neighbourhoods you will see plenty of evidence of art as 'amenity, embellishment or camouflage'. And, as Philips continued, at the time "...there is a growing feeling of – well, why bother? Indeed, an enterprise [i.e. public art] that emerges with such idealism now feels like a lost opportunity."

[Patricia Philips: 'Out of Order - The Public Art Machine', Art Forum 27, pp92-97]

But as the dust began to settle after 'Tilted Arc', other possibilities began to take their cues from thinking that had been ignored or dismissed up until that point. Such things as identity politics, feminism, plurality of publics, multiplicity of communities, mobility of public realm, etc. began to replace the earlier rhetoric of civic value and public good. None of this, though, provided a clear agenda or sense of programme – it simply, and more usefully, returned public art to the freeplay of creativity and suggested new content or materials to work with.

[NOTE: See 'Public Art Public Controversy' ACA Books 1987 for the full account of 'Tilted Arc'].

PUBLIC ART

Today the term 'public art' is the most common term in use to describe a wide range of arts practice, interests and concerns. As such, it has no easy definition.

"The term 'public art' has become widely used in the last thirty-odd years to describe a certain art practice, the results of which are to be found in, mainly, external urban spaces used freely by the general public... The term is used to embrace, among other things, the notion of a general publicness of 'location', as distinct from, the more limited publicness of institutions such as art galleries and contemporary art museums. However the location, where an art work is to be found, is not the limit of what the term attempts to define."

[David Harding]

"Clearly public art is not public just because it is out of doors...it is public because it is a manifestation of art activities and strategies that take the idea of public as the genesis and subject for analysis. It is public because of the kinds of questions it chooses to ask or address, and not because of its accessibility or volume of viewers...Public art is like other art, but it is potentially enriched and amended by a multiplicity of philosophical, political and civic issues."

[Patricia Philips - Temporality & Public Art 1992]

"...precedents for public art offer no template for the present or for the future. As the texture and context of public life changes over the years, 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."

[Patricia Philips]

"A provisional conclusion might be that in advanced art practices of the past thirty years the operative definition of the site has been transformed from a physical location—grounded, fixed, actual—to a discursive vector—ungrounded, fluid, virtual."

[Miwon Kwon]

And at the local level of Birmingham – "There was a time when public art was either pure decoration of statues of monarchs, distinguished military leaders, war heroes or politicians. A minor price to pay for living in more diverse, less hierarchical times is that public art tends to be more slippery, less subservient, perhaps simply odder. There is a fundamental tension in the notion of public art when there is no public consensus of artistic taste, and a danger if it is used as an excuse to let architects and planners off the aesthetic hook. It would be

extraordinary, therefore, if anyone thought that public art added to Birmingham since its latest phase of development began to role in the 1980s was 100 percent successful.”

[Terry Grimley, Birmingham Post 22/08/2001]

[[AT THIS POINT COULD GO TO SEPARATE SESSION ON PUBLIC ART IN BIRMINGHAM]]

From the two Patsy Philips quotes above, it might be possible to say that public art is:

- a diverse range of arts activities and strategies, informed, enriched and amended by a multiplicity of philosophical, political and civic possibilities that attempts to articulate or express the texture of public life via flexible procedures for making and placing art within a critical and inventive and attentive critical process.

Of course, this could be way off the mark. Just ask anybody else and they will happily supply a completely different view on the subject.

SECTION CONCLUSION

To conclude the introduction – in a nutshell, and to cut it short, artists fell out of love with the art object and fell in love (again) with other things, including the built environment. This falling out and in love was due to many things – the death of painting, the post-Aushwicz end of poetry, the Situationist International, American post-war abstract expressionism in the context of the Cold War, land art, community arts, the Artist Placement Group, the Indian cotton beetle, the 1970s oil crisis, and so on.

[NOTE: For an insight into the process of falling out and in love, refer to Studio International, Art & Social Purpose, special issue, March/ April 1976.]

“The 60s and 70s were propelled by a drive away from traditional modes of making, thinking, viewing and presenting art.”

[Live In Your Head]

This module is about what happens when artists fall in love with the built environment, and/or the opportunities and constraints for art in the urban situation. And to quote Ivan Chtcheglov, “SIRE, I AM FROM ANOTHER COUNTRY – We are bored in the city...We are bored in the city, we really have to strain to still discover mysteries.”

SECTION - PUBLIC ART AND THE DESIGN DISCIPLINES

“Since July 1966 I’ve been rendering consultation and advice as an ‘artist consultant’... The project concerns the development of an air terminal between Fort Worth and Dallas... I have engaged in these discussions not as an architect or engineer, but simply as an artist. The discussions do not operate on any presupposed notion of art, engineering or architecture. The problems disclose themselves, as we encounter them. Everything follows an exploratory path.”

[Robert Smithson]

“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’... The function of public art is to de-design.”

[Vito Acconci]

POINT 1

If architecture is vertical and landscape architecture is horizontal, art has to be somewhere else.

"...art isn't necessary anymore as a field, a profession; art is no longer a noun, it [has] become a verb. Art is nothing but a general attitude of thickening the plot.

[Vito Acconci]

POINT 2

Art (public art) is not a discipline in the same ways that architecture or landscape architecture or urban design might be recognised disciplines. [Look up the definition of 'discipline' and comment of non-professionalisation of public art]. Art (public art) is simply only about thickening the plot and being cunning in how we go about things.

"Once a viewer is a participant, there's no receiver, no contemplator - hence, no viewer..."

[Vito Acconci]

"Once a viewer is in the middle of things, art becomes architecture."

[Vito Acconci]

POINT 3

And art becomes like architecture, or landscape architecture, or urban design, or signwriting, or lighting, or flyposting, or whatever. And the artist becomes a chameleon.

Do your own work
but use someone else's clothes.

[Cindy Sherman]

POINT 4

And for the artist caught up in the indiscipline of inter-disciplinary cunning and the 'whatever', there is no base line. There is only ambiguity and freeplay.

There aren't any definite procedures and there aren't any definite tools. You have to decide for yourself what your tools and procedures are going to be.

[Richard Serra]

'The mind of don't know' is the working space of artists...we might look to the positive potential of ambiguity to hold complexity - the condition of the public realm - rather than consider ambiguity a failing. The richness of artists' projects often comes from their ambiguity. Art is one of the few safe spaces for us to be in the realm of ambiguity. There we can think deeply about ideas embodied in questions even if they remain unresolved or are ultimately unanswerable. To work as a curator in concert with living artists is not to predetermine themes and meanings, but to create an open space of potentiality. To be sure, this path, is not always clear and rarely linear. But this open space allows for change in the process, flexibility, fluidity and, so, creativity.

[Mary Jane Jacob]

IN CONCLUSION

"Public art is about the free field, the play of creative vision. The point is not just to produce another thing for people to admire, but to create opportunities, situations that enable [us] to look back at the world with unique perspectives and clear angles of vision. This image embraces the instrumentality, intimacy and criticality of public art. Public life cannot be decreed, but has to be constantly reinvented."

[Patricia Philips]

OTHER POSSIBLE SECTIONS/TOPICS

Arts Council policies on public art
Percent for Art overview
Jeff Kelley's notions of 'artists of site' and 'artists of place'
Jeff Kelley's notions of site, place and time
Post-War Public Art in Birmingham
NOTE: Serra's 'Tilted Arc'

[source: http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/cultureshock/flashpoints/visualarts/tiltedarc_a.html]

In 1981, artist Richard Serra installs his sculpture *Tilted Arc*, in Federal Plaza in New York City. It has been commissioned by the Arts-in-Architecture program of the U.S. General Services Administration, which earmarks 0.5 percent of a federal building's cost for artwork. *Tilted Arc* is a curving wall of raw steel, 120 feet long and 12 feet high, that carves the space of the Federal Plaza in half. Those working in surrounding buildings must circumvent its enormous bulk as they go through the plaza. According to Serra, this is the point, "The viewer becomes aware of himself and of his movement through the plaza. As he moves, the sculpture changes. Contraction and expansion of the sculpture result from the viewer's movement. Step by step the perception not only of the sculpture but of the entire environment changes."

The sculpture generates controversy as soon as it is erected, and Judge Edward Re begins a letter-writing campaign to have the \$175,000 work removed. Four years later, William Diamond, regional administrator for the GSA, decides to hold a public hearing to determine whether *Tilted Arc* should be relocated. Estimates for the cost of dismantling the work are \$35,000, with an additional \$50,000 estimated to erect it in another location. Richard Serra testifies that the sculpture is site-specific, and that to remove it from its site is to destroy it. If the sculpture is relocated, he will remove his name from it.

The public hearing is held in March 1985. During the hearing, 122 people testify in favor of retaining the sculpture, and 58 testify in favor of removing it. The art establishment -- artists, museum curators, and art critics -- testify that *Tilted Arc* is a great work of art. Those against the sculpture, for the most part people who work at Federal Plaza, say that the sculpture interferes with public use of the plaza. They also accuse it of attracting graffiti, rats, and terrorists who might use it as a blasting wall for bombs. The jury of five, chaired by William Diamond, vote 4-1 in favor of removing the sculpture.

Serra's appeal of the ruling fails. On March 15, 1989, during the night, federal workers cut *Tilted Arc* into three pieces, remove it from Federal Plaza, and cart it off to a scrap-metal yard.

The *Tilted Arc* decision prompts general questions about public art, an increasingly controversial subject through the late 1980s and early 1990s in the U.S. and abroad. The role of government funding, an artist's rights to his or her work, the role of the public in determining the value of a work of art, and whether public art should be judged by its popularity are all heatedly debated. Serra's career continues to flourish, despite the controversy. "I don't think it is the function of art to be pleasing," he comments at the time. "Art is not democratic. It is not for the people."

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David Patten 13.03.2007