

The very small public of public art

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It is very exciting to present a double issue of the *Art & the Public Sphere* journal on the subject of public art. Not much has been written about public art in the UK, not recently anyway so when Birmingham Big Art Project approached *Art & the Public Sphere* journal with the generous offer of six funded bursaries for writers, curators and artists it meant we were able to actively support some new work in this area. We commissioned work by Garnett, Graham, Jordan and Whipps and launched an open call for papers from commentators actively engaged in discussing the topic of public art now. This has resulted in a series of contributions that: utilise theories on the contemporary political and cultural condition (Garnett, Orr and Lacy); consider new approaches to the function of art (Deturk, Medina and Saviotti, Szreder) and employ a more comprehensive concept of the public (Child, Graham and Jordan). A range of different positions, opinions and concepts are shared here. Through situating art and its publics in a broader critical framework, we hope that readers, scholars, viewers, artists, curators and commissioners will be able reassess some of the prevailing assumptions on the role and function of public art.

Since the first issue of *Art & the Public Sphere* in 2011 the journal's remit has been to engage with theories and histories of art and the public; public sphere theory provides a series of ways in which to rethink art, not only through the concept of opinion formation - conceiving of art as publishing opinion via exhibition and display - but also through the potential of art to affect individual and collective subjectivity. Additionally, the theory of the public sphere enables us to acknowledge that the oversimplification of the term 'public' in the idiom 'public art' has a fundamental consequence for the way we think and understand arts and its publics (Hewitt & Jordan: 2016, p29).

The lack of discourse on public art in particular, is perhaps due to the way we have invented new means of reframing it which include; socially engaged art, participatory art practice, dialogical art, relational aesthetics and so on. These practices and terms depart from the modernist version of the public artwork which was central to public arts first incarnation whereby artworks placed outside were closely derived from an artist's studio practice; for example, sculptures by Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth, and Philip King. By the 1990's Suzanne Lacy's book *New Genre Public Art* (Lacy: 1994) and the discourse that emerged from exhibitions such as *Culture in Action* curated by Mary Jane Jacobs in 1993, dominated the discourse on art and its publics. These debates marked a shift from the aestheticisation of public space by public art to attempts to democratise it through socially engaged art projects. All types of responses to shared authorship and participation were prolific in the era of New Labour (1997 – 2007) and what was named culture-led regeneration dominated the funding and commissioning of artworks in the public realm. Although new forms of understanding the interaction between artwork and audience were central to these developments the downside of this was that art was put to work; artists, curators and

commissioners found themselves having to resist the overbearing as well as under-researched expectation for art to function as a means of social cohesion (Hewitt: 2011).

In the UK in the eighties and early nineties public art commissioning was led by agencies like Public Arts Commission Agency, Birmingham (PACA) which pursued alternative ways to ensure that artworks were designed to connect with the place that they were to be sited in; this related to ideas of place-making borrowed from urban studies and town planning (Miles, M: 2005). Through utilising heritage and the history of a place as the subject matter for the newly commissioned artworks, art was put to function by asserting the past identity of a locale in order to empower the existing community. So while Thatcher was declaring that there was no such thing as 'society' (Thatcher: 1980) public art commissioners were trying to make sure that artists constructed places that visitors and local people could identify with. Public art became a product of, or marker for, the particular spaces aligned to where the public lived, worked and shopped. Although perhaps an attempt to counter Thatcher's claim, this response saw the producers of public art projects persisting with the idea that we did belong to a society and attempting to represent what it looked like.

Maybe it is speculation on my part as to the affect to which art was defiant in its attempt to visualise its version of community, nevertheless it went about it in the wrong way; citizens were conceived as individual or small couplings of figures for example in *Untitled [Listening]* by Antony Gormley, 1983-4; representations of a town or regions through past industry success, see *Northampton Sculpture* by Graham Ibbeson, 1986 in which he employs the iconic 'cobbler's devil' used in the hand making and repair of shoes and boots (Plowman: 2012, p20); and formal and abstract objects (derived from the greats of Modernism) were designed and made to civilise the passer-by. These versions of the world we live in rely on viewers to contemplate metaphors of community and although many of these objects and projects evoke feelings of union there is no getting away from the fact that you have to participate in a society to belong to it.

'Joining in' is not achieved through multiple images of: kinship, the civic or of past industrial successes, nor is it made through the construction of an audience participating in an art project – being part of something entails acting differently and altering your own behaviour in concert with others.

Public art is not only wracked with a cry of anguish from the rarefied formalist critic when he trips over his cravat, smooths down his corduroy jacket and hisses through tightly pursed lips the words "but is it art? I am more than anxious about the ways in which it is formally compromised". Or the shout of despair 'Noooooo! This is not confrontational enough' from the active, 'culturally capitalised critiquer' who *knows* that the reaffirmation of a positive image of the world doesn't go far towards altering it.

Worst of all, especially for this community of writers and thinkers on public art, the trouble with public art is that it doesn't have a public. No doubt that Robert Garnett is a bit bored with the revival of his statement from the 1990's, "Public art is the only art that doesn't have a public" (Beech: 2005. p3), but this issue of APS enables a re-examination of his statement by presenting some current thinking on public art and the public sphere from those engaged and committed to this on-going debate.

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