David Harding

www.davidharding.net

PUBLIC ART – CONTENTIOUS TERM AND CONTESTED PRACTICE

This is the lead chapter in a book of essays entitled, 'DECADEnt – Public Art – Contentious Term and Contested Practice'. The other essays in the book are by Sam Ainsley, Stan Bonnar, Pavel Buchler, Chris Crickmay, Declan McGonagle and Craig Richardson. Linda James interviews Barbara Kendrick and Sarah Krepp and there is a manifesto statement by John Latham.

The book was published to mark ten years of the founding of the Environmental Art course at Glasgow School of Art and explores the issue of context in contemporary art and art education.

Foulis Press 1996. isbn 0 901904 36 8

PUBLIC ART – CONTENTIOUS TERM AND CONTESTED PRACTICE

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 mainly in external urban spaces used freely by the general public. To put it another way, public art is found in the streets, squares, parks and 'nooks and crannies' of towns and cities. 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 artwork is to be found, is not the limit of what the term attempts to define. In moving art out of the gallery and museum it often occupies non-art-specific, unregulated public open space and engages the attention of vastly increased and diverse publics. As Janet Kardon has said, "Public art is the major arena in which democratic ideas and aesthetic elitism attempt to come to terms with each other." (1) It is these issues that public art practices attempt to address.

It is difficult to determine exactly when the term 'public art' superseded the term 'public sculpture', but it would be safe to suggest that it begins to appear, with some frequency, from around the end of the sixties. In the catalogue of the exhibition 'Sculpture in the Environment', in New York city in 1967, one finds Irving Sandler

writing, “If enough artists are enabled to work in public places, a new aesthetic tradition may develop, a tradition of a modern public art, different from that of studio art.” (2) In another outdoor exhibition ‘Nine Spaces/Nine Artists’, in Minneapolis in 1970, the project director, Richard Koshalek entitles his catalogue essay, “A New Idiom of Public Art” and writes, “In America and abroad many artists are evolving a new idiom of public art whose orientation is outside the gallery/museum context.” (3) These and other references constitute a significant shift away from the tradition of the sculptural object as the main means of artistic practice in public urban space to a broader range of practices.

In the UK, encouraged by the successful integration of art in the Festival of Britain in 1951, several outdoor exhibitions of sculpture were organised in parks and other city locations. In 1968 alone there were exhibitions in Bristol, Coventry, London and Nottingham. The sculptures exhibited were, in the main, drawn from existing stocks of work from artists’ studios or existing maquettes turned into full-scale works. Few of these works were made specifically for the sites they were intended to occupy. In a review of these exhibitions Jeremy Rees identified some of the problems that they had created: “Very few of the works exhibited had been specifically made for the sites on which they were shown and in almost all cases the scale was insignificant.. .. Unless one has actually had experience of the matter, it is very difficult to fully appreciate the extent of the problems brought about by showing work outdoors (as opposed to a gallery) and exposed to the unpredictable reactions of a puzzled and often, superficially, hostile public.. .. Artists are unaware of the realities of the situation and fail to realise that conditions encountered in showing work in public, outdoors, bears no relation to exhibitions in galleries. This by no means invalidates the concept of city sculpture but it does create a situation with which the sculptor must be prepared to come to terms at the outset.” (4) Rees is pointing out that the works in these exhibitions needed to be related to their sites, that scale needed to be addressed, that attention had to be given to the audiences and that the settings were very different to the accepted ones for showing art. These observations demonstrate the ‘worrying away’ at a problem that gives rise to another term, which is related to public art, that is the notion of the ‘site-specific.’

Organisers and curators of these temporary exhibitions began to raise funds to allow them to commission new work for specific sites but artists, in the early seventies, still seemed unable or unwilling to adjust their practice to the demands that these new opportunities presented. One such exhibition, the ‘City Sculpture Project’ in 1972, funded by the Peter Stuyvesant Foundation, was an ambitious one. Sixteen sculptures were commissioned for specific sites in a number of English cities. It was hoped by the organisers that, allowing the works to be on site for six months would, “give the public sufficient time to come to a reasoned evaluation of these sculptures in their environment,” and that the works would then be acquired by the relevant city authorities. In the event only one or two were acquired and the rest refused. Some

were very badly vandalised. Some comments by participating artists shed light on the way they viewed the opportunity. One said that “the problem with public sculpture lies with the public, not with sculpture.” (5) Another said, “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 sculptor’s freedom of action.” (6) It was in the aftermath of this exhibition that Lawrence Alloway wrote an article entitled, ‘The Public Sculpture Problem.’ (7) In it he confronts, head-on, the problems artists have to deal with in making public art in a way seldom seen in the plethora of articles and essays which have been written on the subject. It was obvious that artists faced real problems in making work that would engage the general public’s sympathy, understanding and respect and would survive, even for the limited period of a temporary exhibition. Memorial sculptures, statues and monuments exist in all cities and these are, in the main, accepted as part of the fabric of these places. In these exhibitions no person or event was being memorialised. In keeping with the times what was being presented was ‘art about art’. For Alloway this was not sufficient to legitimate these works as ‘public works.’ If the word ‘public’ is placed before the word ‘art’ (or sculpture) then, by definition, something other than art about art is being suggested. It is this that has caused artists, critics and curators to fulminate about there being no such thing as ‘public art’ only the more general term ‘art in public places’.

Modernism spawned a certain totalitarianism and few artists with any claim to modernity and contemporanaeity carried out public art works. They felt that it would demand some adjustment to their normal practice, if only to respond to the brief of the commission and the context in which the work was to be placed. Also, given the controversies that attended most public art commissions at this time, the work risked being subjected to vilification, if not, physical attack. As Arthur Danto, art critic of the US magazine ‘The Nation’, has said, “It is the pre-emption of public spaces by an art that is indifferent, if not hostile, to human needs that has aroused such partisan passions.” (8) There are examples where the controversy that surrounded a publicly commissioned sculpture has died away and the work has survived. In many of these cases the works have established themselves, not so much for their meaning, but because of the worldwide fame of the artists. In 1965 the ‘Chicago Picasso’, as it is known, (‘Head of a Woman’), was unveiled amidst an enormous controversy. Now it is something with which the people of Chicago identify and by which the city promotes itself in tourist posters and brochures. It has become a potent symbol of a progressive city with claims to high cultural and intellectual standing. Within a short walk of the Picasso are works by Calder, Chagall, Dubuffet and Miro. In Grande Rapids, Michigan, Calder’s ‘La Grande Vitesse’ survived a similar controversy to become the logo of the city, to be found on council notepaper and emblazoned on city council vehicles. Notwithstanding the title of Calder’s work in Grande Rapids, none of these works attempt in any way to relate to the context of their sites. They are in form and concept not different from the studio practice of the artists. They are, in effect, ‘art in public places.’ There are instances in which works,

which were intended to be permanent, have been removed from their sites. Two examples of this type of controversy during the 1980's were Ron Robertson Swan's 'Vault', removed from Melbourne's city square and, the most infamous of all, Richard Serra's 'Tilted Arc' removed from Federal Plaza in Lower Manhattan. Both were major setbacks for the notion of 'art in public places' brought about by the insensitive attitudes of the artists and the commissioning bodies that were responsible for instituting and placing these works. W.T.J. Mitchell suggests in the introduction to his book, 'Art in the Public Sphere', that the controversy surrounding the Richard Serra work could be seen "as a signal that modernism can no longer mediate public and private spheres on its own terms, but must submit itself to social negotiation, and anticipate reactions ranging from violence to indifference." (9) There arose in both cases sufficient public opposition to have the works removed. Other works of this nature remain in forlorn states, badly treated, covered in posters and graffiti and suffering from such a lack of maintenance that the works are no longer the works as they were originally intended. On the other hand where these kinds of works are located in new 'public' spaces, created as part of huge office developments or shopping malls, which include a high degree of security and therefore become 'regulated' spaces, they survive relatively unscathed. Richard Serra's 'Fulcrum' in Broadgate in London, is one such example. Alloway laconically suggests that "If a work can be reached it will be defaced. If the subsequent changes reduce the level of information of the work, it was not a public work to start with." He goes on: "A public sculpture should be invulnerable or inaccessible. It should have the material strength to resist attack or be easily cleanable, but it also needs a formal structure that is not wrecked by alteration." In a note to his essay he presciently suggests: " Another solution to the problem of public sculpture is expendability; however I am deferring here to the convention of solid materials and longish duration as the proper state of sculpture. Nonetheless, loose, scattered, changeable, growing pieces, with anticipated temporal limits, should not be left out of account." (10)

It is the use of terms such as 'art in public places' that clearly signify a resistance to the whole notion of anything called public art. The argument has been well-rehearsed – all art is public and it is therefore unnecessary to distinguish a certain art practice as more public than any other. Galleries and museums are public places open to anyone. Streets and squares are public places and artists should not be required to adjust their practice and treat them any differently to galleries and museums. To do so would impose limitations on the freedom of the artist and therefore on artistic expression. One of the problems with this approach is that while the vast majority of people are more or less willing to let artists get on with what they do within the confines of the gallery, when that is imposed on them in their streets, there is a justifiable sense of resentment. This is no good for anyone; not for art, for artists or the range of non-art specialist publics that make up the majority of society.

The attempts by artists to shift art out of the gallery and onto the streets in the 1960's were not simply about changing the locations of where art could be viewed but were about changing art itself, broadening its influence "born of democratic urges" (11) and attesting, not that art was good for society, but that art was part of society and its systems. While curators were organising outdoor exhibitions of contemporary sculpture, dominated by formalism and abstraction, artists themselves were taking their own initiatives across a broad range of art activities. To them formalism and abstraction were inappropriate forms of art practice with which to engage the broad constituencies of audiences who rarely, if ever, visited galleries or museums and, as a consequence, did not have the appropriate languages to come to terms with the art exhibited. The question that these artists were attempting to address was: could a critical contemporary art be developed which would achieve an engaged understanding and, yes, pleasure with broad unspecified publics? This wide-ranging move out of the gallery to seek new forms and systems of art practice was artist-led. It was the artists themselves who decided to look beyond the confines of the space and the audience of the gallery. Part of the politics of these actions was to oppose the commercialisation of art and its commodification. As Michael Heizer put it in 1969 after his move into the deserts of Nevada, "The museums and collections are stuffed, the floors are sagging, but the real space exists." (12) John Beardsley in his book, 'Earthworks and Beyond,' says, "Heizer shared in a then widespread notion that the art world was afflicted with a too grand preciosity, that artworks were valued only as commodities and that they were limited by their preoccupation with strictly formal concerns." (13)

Some artists offered their services to poor and under-privileged communities in an attempt to give form to the lived milieu. Mural painting and sculpture offered ways to make art which was owned by the community, some of whom collaborated in the development of the ideas and the execution of the works. These artists shared a commitment to serving working class culture and the environmental improvement of the inner city, suburban and new town housing estates. Other groups of artists formed to explore different ways of extending art practice. The 'Artist Placement Group', founded by John Latham and Barbara Stevini, developed a very particular way for artists to engage in non-art settings by organising placements for artists in institutions ranging from sea, rail and bus companies to civil service departments. The key premise which guided the process of making art out of, or in, these placements was the APG maxim, "the context is half the work." This was a crucial and enormously influential attitude for artists to adopt in positioning themselves in relation to the host community. Artists themselves began to develop the new skills needed to deal with non-art secular organisations and settings from the civic and social to business and industry. However the tentative and fragile success of many of these ventures was arrested and then diverted by the arts bureaucracies most infamously in the case of APG. The Arts Council of Great Britain intervened to stop the Civil Service funding directly the work that APG had been developing with it. In the mid-seventies I wrote that it might

be that the arts councils had no role to play in relations between artists and local authorities; that artists were capable of doing this for themselves and did not need another bureaucracy to intervene. Similarly problemmatic for artists' initiatives was the opportunistic growth of self appointed public art curators and the organisations which they set up. They brought with them the essentially modernist attitudes that prevailed in the gallery culture of the time whereas public art was, by its very nature, a critique of modernism. They created barriers and obstructions between artists and the constituencies with which they wanted to work. They promoted 'art in public places' because it was the only thing they knew. The possibilities being explored by artists were seriously damaged by this growth in art bureaucracy and led, for a crucial period, to a limitation in the development of public art. (14)

Public art must be a broad inclusive church. Writing in a planning study for the development of public art in Seattle, reckoned by many to be the city with the most successful public art strategy, the authors compared public art to the public library. (15) Public libraries contains the broadest possible range of books from those for children to contemporary novels, from the classics to the very latest books which attempt to break the bounds of existing knowledge and understanding. Public art must aim to be as representative in its aims. In a very public way it can enrich a city, reinforce its culture, create identity, give rise to myth and humour, encourage risk, represent diversity, give voice to the unsung and allow us to remember. The new public art curators did not recognise this necessary breadth and imposed their own criteria on what could be commissioned and what could not.

Meanwhile some artists, particularly in the USA, were pushing ahead on their own. Siah Armajani, Alice Aycock, Scott Burton, Nancy Holt and Robert Irwin, among others had, by the mid 1980's, created a large body of work that attracted the attention of the art critic of the 'New Yorker', Calvin Tomkins. In two articles in 1983 and 1984 he gave serious critical attention to these developments in public art in the USA and suggested that it, "……. is generally now thought of as an established good …. something that governments feel obliged to support and many citizens feel they ought to have." He concluded: "To make significant public art today, they believe, it is necessary to take the public into consideration. In our century this is a revolutionary idea." (16)

In his essay in 'Studio International' Lawrence Alloway drew attention to the fact that there are different levels in the regulation of public space. Some are less regulated than others and public art resides more naturally in those spaces which are more freely accessible. Barrie Greenbie in 'Dimensions of the Human Landscape,' (16) suggests that within these less regulated public spaces there are also differing characteristics. To describe two of these he created two new words, 'proxemic"'and 'distemic'. Proxemic spaces are those which can claim a very defined community or group, such as one might find in the residential areas of cities where people feel a strong territor-

ial claim to their front street and surrounding area. Distemic spaces are those major shared spaces in the centres of towns and cities used by all citizens and visitors. He says of the latter, “They are the domain of the individual which accommodate a degree of non-conformity which few proxemic spaces will allow.” The implication of this is that different processes and attitudes must be adopted in different settings in creating works of public art. In all cases of course the very best, in terms of ideas, imagination and skill, must be brought to every work. The works must challenge as well as delight and inform.

Artists have always contributed in one way or another to the external fabric of cities. Only during the twentieth century did this diminish to almost zero. In the past the work of artists in cities has been, in the main, concerned with notions of permanence or at least the long-term. This is still a vital task for artists today to continue to address. The development of the fabric of towns and cities cannot be left only to architects, engineers and planners. Artists must still bring their own particular skills to the enrichment of the complexity, ‘the warp and weft’ of urban development for the long term. To paraphrase a preface to Michel de Certeau’s essay, ‘Walking in the City,’ public art gives to walking that extra meaning and makes it different to the official, from the business of life, in the way that poetry is different from a planning manual. It slows down the pace and increases perception. It grants to the twentieth century urban experience a kind of drifting and the glamour that Walter Benjamin found in the nineteenth century “leisured observer.” Everyday life has a special value when it takes place in the gaps of the larger power structures. (18)

However, much important contemporary art practice has been transient and temporary. Public art also embraces the temporary. The power of an image or idea that is seen or experienced for a limited period can remain embedded in memory. The residue remains as documentation which can be called upon to reinforce the work in the collective memory. The art of ideas, conceptualism, may have more to say about art and the city than the art of objects as Esther and Joachen Gerz have shown in their invisible monuments.

In the USA in 1995 a group of artists and critics came together to examine a range of social activist public art practices which have developed and thrived in recent years. These practices were so far removed from public art as object that they felt moved to describe their work as ‘new genre public art.’ (19) Notwithstanding the problems attached to anything described as “new”, this is a very helpful term. It distinguishes between the static object as public art from a more fluid and broad range of practices which aim at social change and the raising of consciousness. Artists share their practice in collaboration with groups of non-artists (or non-professional artists) in such a way as to provide, among other things, a transformative experience. If one cares to look back before going forward, as Berthold Brecht advises, one would find that these were the very attitudes which informed community art practices from the six-

ties onwards. New genre public art is evolved community art practice. While the development of these practices has been artist-led they have been assisted by the serious, critical attention of writers and critics such as Lucy Lippard and Suzi Gablik. This has not been the experience in the UK where there is no equivalent body of critical writing on the subject.

Conversely, unlike the USA, the art schools in the UK, over the last twenty years, have responded by setting up full-time, part-time, undergraduate and postgraduate courses, as well as options within existing courses, to educate artists in these developing public art practices. If it has been found necessary to set up these courses and research projects, it seems to confirm that other skills and attitudes have to be learned and other layers of creative challenge confronted when artists move their practice into the wider public domain. Public art is a useful term for the art that results from this shift.

1. **JANET KARDON, INTRODUCTION TO CATALOGUE OF 'URBAN ENCOUNTERS,' INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART, UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA, MARCH 1980.**

2. **IRVING SANDLER, REF. BY JEREMY REES,'STUDIO INTERNATIONAL,' JULY/AUG. 1972, VOL. 184, NO. 946.**

3. **RICHARD KOSHALEK, IBID**

4. **JEREMY REES, 'STUDIO INTERNATIONAL' JULY/AUG 1972 VOL. 184 NO. 946**

5. **WILLIAM TUCKER, REF. ALLOWAY BELOW/LI>**

6. **WILLIAM TURNBULL, REF. ALLOWAY BELOW**

7. **LAWRENCE ALLOWAY, 'STUDIO INTERNATIONAL' OCT. 1972 VOL. 184 NO. 948**

8. **ARTHUR DANTO, 'THE NATION,' (QUOTING MY NOTES – UNSURE OF EXACT REF.)**

9. **WILLIAM MITCHELL, ‘ART IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE,’ PP. 3, PUB. UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS, 1992**

10. **LAWRENCE ALLOWAY, REF. 7. ABOVE**

11. **KATE LINKER, ‘PUBLIC SCULPTURE,’ ‘ART FORUM,’ MARCH 1981**

12. **MICHAEL HEIZER, REF. JOHN BEARDLSEY, ‘EARTHWORKS AND BEYOND,’ PUB. ABBEVILLE PRESS, 1989, PP13.**

13. **JOHN BEARDSLEY, IBID**

14. **MOST PUBLIC ART CURATORS HAVE SINCE LEARNED THE IMPORTANCE OF SUCH BREADTH IN PUBLIC ART PRACTICES.**

15. **JIM HIRSCHFIELD AND LARRY ROUCHE, ‘ARTWORK NETWORK – A PLANNING STUDY FOR SEATTLE – ART IN THE CIVIC CONTEXT,’ PUB. THE CITY OF SEATTLE, 1984.**

16. **CALVIN TOMKINS, ‘THE NEW YORKER,’ MAARCH 21, 1983 PP. 92-97. SEE ALSO DEC. 3, 1984, PP.178-181.**

17. **BARRIE GREENBIE, ‘SPACE – DIMENSIONS OF THE HUMAN LANDSCAPE.’ PUB. YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1981.**

18. **MICHEL DE CERTEAU, ‘THE PRACTICE OF EVERYDAY LIFE,’ PUB. UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY, 1984.**

19. **SUZANNE LACY, ED. ‘MAPPING THE TERRAIN – NEW GENRE PUBLIC ART,’ PUB. BAY PRESS, SEATTLE, 1995.**