

Art & Spatial Politics

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One of the early projects for students in the MA in *Public Art & Design* course at Chelsea College of Art & Design involves London's South Bank. Students are asked to consider the approaches to the South Bank – that is, river and transport links, and the public spaces within and alongside the complex. They set out in all innocence and enthusiasm to this great cultural centre, and are immediately knocked for a burton by an overwhelming problem. Like Birmingham, London also has its bull ring; it is the huge area under the bridges and roundabouts approaching the South Bank Centre; it is the 'home' of the homeless.

Inevitably, many students on the course begin designing temporary shelters for the dwellers in the Bull Ring, or get in touch with the community groups in Westminster and Lambeth for direct action strategies, arrange talk-ins with the dossers, or conceive of film or photographic projects to image their plight. Nevertheless, on both left and right of the political spectrum, the usual consensus of the agonised student debate is that homelessness must be left to governmental agencies to address; a design solution would be to sanction the status quo. Those who have argued themselves back into the fine art canon after the first period of distress find themselves designing for the safe interiors of the Festival Hall, or the Hayward. The so-called 'public' spaces around the South Bank Centre are seldom addressed; the spectre of beggars, in their posts on the streets, steps and bridges leading into the area – guarding the margins – is too daunting; the kids skate-boarding beneath the Queen Elizabeth Hall are too violent; the crack dealers in the car parks are too invisible. The contrast between the disruptive public space that encompasses everyone, and the pacified public space which excludes and controls, or at the least deters, is too extreme.

The discourse of public art in Britain – if it can be so elevated – represents a reluctance to address the central issue of 'publics' and 'public spaces'. In fact, like its patrons, artists and administrators go along very happily with the single, unitary use of the term. The public domain, singular, is an unproblematic shorthand for a realm which embraces diversity, indeed naturalises it, and where uncontroversial regard for the 'greater good' demands the exclusion of certain groups and control of violence. Think of the removal of 'tent city' from Lincoln's Inn Fields in London which is now 'protected' by a high wire fence, or the picketing and policing of the City of London on Sundays. The power relations on which this realm is based are not acknowledged, except in a negative capacity; that is, when complaints are voiced about the neglect of public spaces. The language we use is interesting: an ill-maintained public site 'invites' vandalism or 'attracts' bums and beggars. This is the liberal public sphere, which Jurgen Habermas defined as 'an all-inclusive site of uncoerced discussion and opinion formation, a place that transcends politics, commerce, private interests and even state control'.¹ This notion of public, of course, depends on the complementary notions of the private sphere, investment and ownership.

¹ Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger, Cambridge, Mass., 1989.

It is not possible at this time to elaborate the issue of 'private' space. Suffice it to say that the traditional boundaries between public and private are becoming more and more eroded. This, partially, has to do with privileging the 'rewards' of psychology, as Richard Sennett defined it in 1977, in explaining the confusions that have arisen between public and intimate life in a society of atomized social spaces. 'A society which fears impersonality encourages fantasies of collective life, parochial in nature.'² The discussion is also complicated by the current philosophical suspicion of binary opposites. Public/private is a concept of modernism, not post-modernism; and indeed most artists do not make distinctions between the public and private aspects of their practice, as I will discuss later.

The public spaces in which artists are invited to participate, within the burgeoning field of public art, are *not* the spaces of despair. They are the upgraded areas, the inner city reclamation projects, the spaces in front of new office or light-industrial development, the so-called 'business parks'; the hastily reconsidered sites of temporary European cities-of-culture. The development corporations of Docklands or Cardiff Bay Development, or prestige overseas commissions, such as the new British Council building in Delhi.

Public art, as Rosalyn Deutsche reminds us with reference to New York, is related to a seemingly optimistic programme of growth: but '...in the late capitalist city, growth, far from a uniform process, is driven by the hierarchical differentiation of social groups and territories. Residential components of prosperity – gentrification and luxury housing – are not distinct from, but in fact depend upon, residential facets of poverty – disinvestment, eviction, displacement, homelessness...redevelopment proceeds, not as an embracing benefit, but according to social relations of ascendance, that is, of domination.' 'No longer required as productive forces, the homeless themselves have no requirements.'³

In her article, entitled *Uneven Development: Public Art in New York City*, Rosalyn Deutsche then goes on to analyse the public art project; its notions of use, function and public benefit, site-specificity, the invocation of the 'community'; the affirmation of team-work and collaboration. Her conclusion is that the 'real social function of the new public art [is] to reify as natural the conditions of the late capitalist city into which it hopes to integrate us'. What has been eliminated from the new "site-specific" art is not "individualism" as opposed to team-work, but political resistance in favour of collaboration with the forces of power.'

In a paper delivered to Public Art Forum at its AGM in London in 1992, entitled *Flanagan's Hare: The Impossibility of the Notion of Art as Public Good*, I recalled how the public art movement in this country, with which I have been closely identified, had originally been conceived of as a radical alternative to mainstream gallery art, and a form of cultural empowerment. My conclusion – and I promised myself, the last remarks I would ever make on the subject – were as follows: 'Public art came into being on one ticket; it is now being practised under a whole new set of conditions. I believed,

² Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*, Faber & Faber, London (1986 edition), p.308.

³ Rosalyn Deutsche, *Uneven Development: Public Art in New York City in Out There: Marginalisation and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russell Ferguson, Martha Gevers et al, The New Museum of Contemporary Art and MIT Press, Cambridge Mass. & London, 1990.

naively, that the vision of the artist could be both legible and socially and spatially transformative. I now suspect that artistic ideologies are more likely to be distorted by their appropriation into the public sphere than to influence it. By co-opting artists to a collusive, semi-administrative role, their ability to critique culture has been neutralised.'

What I shall attempt to do, in very truncated form in the rest of this short lecture, is to look at some of the issues of Birmingham's public art programme, and try to unravel some of the narratives, and some of the co-options. Public art has become the new official art, and it is not by chance that its discourse (like that of architecture and town-planning) concentrates on issues of formalism and functionalism. It is encouraged to participate in vox-pop historical narratives, but its reading as representation of power relations – or indeed any other programme but the aesthetic or the utilitarian – is denied.

The title of the 1994 Art Historians' conference, *Forward: Art & Industry*, has been adopted – improbably – from Birmingham city's crest. The sub-title *Past and Future*, in parenthesis, assures us that the title is not ironic, and that no critique is implied. On the contrary, what seems to be connoted is that art and industry, having been satisfactory bed-fellows since the Enlightenment are still happily married and looking forward to the millennium.⁴ I'm not sure that art and industry ever had a very equal role. After all, in line with gender politics, art as female was presumed to be *servicing masculine* industry in the nineteenth century, and I don't know where industry is to be found these days. But without doubt, the two are linked in Raymond Mason's sculpture in Centenary Square entitled *Forward*.

This sculpture, the focus of the square, depicts a procession of working people from Birmingham's past, moving onwards from the rather elegant early Victorian factories, with the smoke of employment in fixed profusion, to the clear, blank future of the International Conference Centre or ICC. Arms are held aloft, presumably a gesture of post-industrial employment, as there are no spanners or sickles, and the colour scheme is grime-free pink, cream and blue. The work is extolling what Dickens called 'those infernal and damnably good old times'.⁵ Old and new Birmingham are caught in the same confusions of old and new Victorianism; simultaneously embracing innovation and invention as well as viewing the past with self-congratulatory gravity.

Raymond Mason, a former Brummie, lives in France. His populist worker-imagery belongs to the ideologies of the 1950s, and his use of fibre-glass and synthetic materials to the 1960s. His resurrection in Birmingham, on a major redevelopment project, signals a comforting look to the past to legitimate the present. The notion that Birmingham *has* a linear past is very important to a city which has been so continuously and cavalierly redeveloped. But the issue of heritage is also an overwhelming desire of modern Brits everywhere to decorate their new spaces with evocations of an *ersatz* past, rather than question the present or suggest the future. This factor is exacerbated in Britain, but is also part of the post-modern condition. Fredric Jameson: 'This approach to the present by way of...pastiche of the stereotypical past, endows present reality and

⁴ Let's not forget that the Royal Society of Arts founded 1754, was and still is a society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce.

⁵ Quoted in David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985, p.98.

the openness of present history with the spell and distance of a glossy mirage...we seem increasingly incapable of fashioning representations of our own current experience'.⁶

Mason's political credentials are obviously excellent and his heart might well never have shifted from its right place. But the simplicity of the encoding of this work is at odds with the complex narrative of its enactment and the spatial politics of the city.

Birmingham's Public Art programme, for which, rightly, it has received much acclaim, has accompanied a massive redevelopment programme. The upgrading of Centenary Square, with its design by artist Tess Jaray, has created a patterned link between the disparate buildings on the site (including theatre, local authority offices) and the new ICC, and extension of the already commercially successful Conference Centre outside Birmingham. The ICC building itself is linked by a bridge to an adjacent hotel, designed by Renton Howard Wood Levine, who also formed a temporary partnership with Percy Thomas Partnership (the Convention Centre partnership) to design the ICC. The literal bridge between the two buildings also signals the metaphoric bridge between public and private investment which this project encapsulates. Over the canal are car-parks, restaurants, pubs and hotels and the massive sports arena. It is a sign of the times that Labour controlled Birmingham City Council *could* not invest in housing and did not propose a programme of upgrading city dereliction in the poor peripheries of the city. It chose this high profile, mixed funding programme to attract investment to the city and has, of course, been both applauded and criticised for it. It is also significant, that like other (formerly) metropolitan authorities in Britain, Birmingham has not looked inwards to London, the seat of government, but has positioned itself globally; attracting EEC funding, building sophisticated communications links with the widest possible constituency, thinking about Olympics and so on. Centenary Square is not the heart of the city of Birmingham – its organs have been eviscerated many times – but the open square of the fictive global village.

I hasten to add that the square *is* of course also used by city dwellers on a daily basis and crowds attend public celebrations and special events. It is interesting how the road on one side forms a significant barrier; families attending popular Saturday registry-office weddings on the other side do not always venture into the square for celebratory photographs, and so on. The square is a designated forum for the public as consumers and spectators. And, in line with the spatial analysis with which I began this talk, it is worth noting that although the spectacle is reflected in the glass-front of the ICC building, the one-way reflective glass does not admit a view into the supposedly public spaces of the interior. This matter is of some importance to me personally, because it means that only when lit at night is the interior mural designed by myself partially visible to people in the square.

The building is the ultimate in polysemic structures. It is a conference centre for hire and it also houses the star of subsidised culture, The Birmingham City Orchestra, conductor Simon Rattle. Commissioned art sits side by side with restaurateur's naff; vending machines sit side by side with tropical trees; high-tech cohabits with po-mo. Every hall in this building is designed for multiple usage. Flexibility is one of the unquestioned orthodoxies of contemporary architects and their clients: an expensive

⁶ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Verso Books, London & New York, 1991, p.21.

notion, partially about hedging economic bets, partially about 'democratic' usage. Public art, like public space, is also supposed to be everything to everybody, all the time, all in one package. But it doesn't work like that in practice. Visitors who come to see the public art works within the building are often denied access because parts of the building have been decreed off-limit. The management, required by licensing rules to segregate drinkers from non-drinkers, have placed barriers which obscure my foyer mural from 'public' view. A temporary exhibition was at one time hung on the mural by the house committee; after all, a wall is a wall is a wall, and someone was paying to hire the space. The stained-glass windows within the building by Alex Belleschenko, commissioned by the City, are obscured by the banners hung by the management committee. The sculpture by Vincent Woropay is difficult to find. It is a small piece and has now been removed from its original site and is perambulated around to inappropriate sites and dark corners. I could go on with this list...The point I am making is that this space has been privatised; it is an extension of the hotel rather than the square. As a result, the publicly commissioned art in this building, already banalized by the glitzy detailing of the architecture, is also subject to officially condoned vandalism by the operators. Art has become totally marginalised within a hostile and alien system.

Birmingham has at least redesigned the city connections between its civic and cultural institutions; let us not forget that most British towns only pedestrianise their shopping street and plop public art, like public loos, amongst the paviers and the planters. Victoria Square is also a complex series of narratives, and 'arena for the encounter between differences' as Lefebvre describes city spaces.⁷ On the one hand there is the city sponsored development, with a central fountain with sculptures by Dhruva Mistry; on the other hand there is Antony Gormley's Iron Man commissioned by the TSB for the front of their Birmingham headquarters. The contiguous schemes alert us to the fact that this public space is owned by business and local government, by share-holders, investors and council tax payers alike. Their claims to the space are by no means resolved, although they all seem to make a claim on history.

The sphinxes by Dhruva Mistry around the stepped pool are in a long tradition of such composite figures. Sphinxes and chimaere represent the intermingling of east/west, archaic/classical, benign/frightening, known/unknown. Dhruva Mistry is a very successful artist born in India, and this project represents an acknowledgement of Birmingham's cultural diversity. It also represents a very tight controlling brief, to which the artist was required to conform. The sculptures have a certain mechanistic quality, perhaps because they were contracted out, one of the hazards of large-scale commissions. Mistry's work is usually modelled in a more fluid manner.

The notion of a 'water feature' is a favourite bit of design-speak, beloved of patrons and architects, and seems part of an easy assumption that modern public art follows in a long tradition back to the Italian baroque. Water features incorporated into hard gardening have to do with symmetry, with geometry, with regulation, and of course power, in the sense of control of the infrastructure. Someone can pull the plug or turn the water supply on or off. The formal gardens at Versailles, the model for most subsequent fountain projects however modest, are about hierarchies of space,

⁷ H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, Oxford, 1992.

centralising organisation, and the subjugation of disorderly nature to an imperial programme.

(I often think of this when working in the National Art Library at the Victoria & Albert Museum, and look at the little 'Versigh' of the central courtyard, the divinely suburban Pirelli Garden, representing the iron fist in the rubber plug). It was perhaps not by chance that Rory Coonan, an Arts Council officer who was also the adviser on the Victoria Square project, envisaged an authoritarian and historicising water works in front of the City's Council Chambers.

We might compare the intentions, if not the scale, of this city-square scheme with major public art projects in France. Dani Karavan's *Axe Majueur* for Cergy-Pontoise 1986-7 and Daniel Buren's installation in the Cour d'Honneur, Palais Royal, Paris, 1985, although they eschew narrative figuration in favour of minimal abstraction, are directly involved with the grand narratives of centrist power. The gigantism of the schemes, and strictness of their geometries and planning – Karavan's great directional swathe cut through Cergy situates the satellite town in relation to Paris and the Place de la Concorde, and the overwhelming proliferation of Buren's dissected columns – situate these projects as the direct heirs of historicist State grandeur.

Gormley's piece refers to Birmingham's industrial past; the figure is in iron, and the raised seam along its circumference signals the form of a mould, a container; it also appears bound, like one of Michelangelo's slaves. It is *chthonic*, partly rooted in the ground from which iron ore is mined. It is at an ominous angle, so that the sculpture appears to move as one approaches from the direction of the station. Gormley evokes the historic through the medium of his very personal, contemporary language. In a way, Gormley, who has been working with castings of his own body for many years, originally in lead, as empty encasings of the absent body, has tactically colluded with the appropriation of his art into the necessary narratives – and in this case historicizing narratives – of public art discourse.

The city can incorporate contradiction and diffuse difference (most of the time) but it cannot frame the artwork and it cannot guarantee visual longevity. Even if gigantic in scale, or raised on a plinth, a public artwork can become as marginalised in its public perception as the homeless with whom I began this talk. W. J. T. Mitchell has constructed an exciting, if not totally convincing argument about public art and violence; the image as an act or *object* of violence, that is subject to vandalism; the image as a *weapon* of violence, that is a device for attack, coercion or simply dislocation; the image as a *representation* of violence – and here he cites pornography as well as traditional monuments to destruction.⁸ But he omits the final miserable act of violence which is that of creeping invisibility. 'There is nothing in the world as invisible as monuments' wrote Robert Musil. 'Doubtless they have been erected to be seen – even to attract attention; yet at the same time something has impregnated them against attention. Like a drop of water on an oilskin, attention runs down them without stopping for a moment...'⁹

⁸ W.J.T. Mitchell, 'The Violence of Public Art: Do the Right Thing' in *Art and the Public Sphere*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell, University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London, 1990-92.

⁹ Quoted in Marina Warner, *Monuments and Maidens: The Allegory of the Female Form*, Picador, London, 1987, p.21.

Artist Richard Wilson has submitted many schemes for public art competitions without so far being 'awarded' a commission; he does not regard his work as either public or private. His installation at Matt's Gallery in London during the Spring of 1994 was entitled *Watertable*. Matt's Gallery has always been the most private of public galleries: where the curator collaborates with the artist on creating an installation for a short period of time; where there is no artistic 'product' for sale, and which is only open at certain times. It is the proverbial pure white cube, but it is within an industrial building. (Here at last is the connection between art and industry!) Part of the magic of *Watertable* for me was the way the work was hidden behind a closed door, to be mysteriously revealed; the way the table was placed diagonally between the slender industrial columns, adding dynamic to the formal orientation of the room; the moment of surprise when one understood how the concrete floor had been excavated to contain the billiard table, or heard a drip of water within the concrete pipe and suddenly perceived that the artist has bored down to the water-table below; the view out of the window at the adjacent canal, now, ominously, connected with the inside. The billiard table was undeniably just a billiard table. It was also a green field at the level of the floor, and a line and semi-circular markings just hinting at the public arena of the football pitch, itself unreal astro-turf. All of this was very private, very quiet and very uneasy. The gallery *framed* the work, at the same time as the piece subverted its architectural host-space. It was work that questioned its own context.

Although Wilson rejects a dialectics of public and private, the tension between them seems to me to be the subject of this work. And the effectiveness of the critique depended on the semi-privacy of its siting. Whether art in public spaces in the 1990s can challenge the politics of its placement and critique its own enactment outside of the privileged space of the gallery is for me one of the central issues of the public art debate.

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