

## **Encapsulating public art: the PADT archive at the Henry Moore Institute**

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Items selected from the archive of the Public Art Development Trust (PADT) were exhibited at the Henry Moore Institute in the summer of 2009. An open discussion in the gallery on 1 July included contributions from Hannah Collins, Vong Phaophanit, Michael Sandle, and Bill Woodrow, with curator Stephen Feeke and archivist Claire Sawyer. I had some contact with PADT in the late 1980s and early 1990s, both as an academic writing on public art and as an advisor to the Department of Health on art projects in hospitals. Seeing the exhibition in Leeds reminded me of a practice which is now encapsulated in a history. Archives, after all, are historical resources, of use to researchers after the event. But public art's history is problematic, too; not only in that mainstream art is now frequently encountered in non-gallery settings - as in Antony Gormley's *One & Other*, his summer 2009 project for the empty plinth in London's Trafalgar Square - but also in as much as its roots and motivations were always in a potential conflict. In one way, public art might have been a democratic effort to take art to a mass public, or to enliven the sites of everyday urban occupation. Suzanne Lacy argued in 1995 that some non-gallery art projects had genuine social value, and were not (as a cynic might say) a means to expand the market for sculpture.<sup>1</sup> As it happens, the art market expands without assistance. Tate Modern's 2008 summer show, *Street Art*, showed that graffiti has been re-coded as a collectible commodity.

Yet, leaving aside the cynic's view, the expansion and professionalisation of public art which occurred from the 1980s onwards - of which PADT was a central agent - was an attempt to expand, not art's market, but art's infrastructure, extending from the

original aim of the Arts Council - established within the post-war welfare state - to improve the quality of, and widen access to, contemporary art. The rapidity of that expansion was enabled by a new expediency, by which public art was taken as a lever to the complex socio-economic process of urban renewal following the widespread de-industrialisation of British cities. One of the first expedient uses of culture was the Liverpool Garden Festival in 1984, following civil disorder in Toxteth. That narrative continued in 2008 with the city's year as an EU Capital of Culture (with Stavanger). The motivation for the EU Cities/Capitals of Culture programme differs, however, from that of public art, being an attempt to find a cultural geography through which to promote European cities which are outside the geography of what Saskia Sassen has called a (single) global city of financial services composed of enclaves in New York, Tokyo and London.<sup>2</sup> Having said that, the worlds of culture and economy do combine in the symbolic economies through which cities compete globally for investment and tourism, in which context flagship cultural institutions and major sporting events are key components.

The expansion and professionalisation of public art followed this agenda: when cities needed new identities and images, they were in part provided by new art projects and commissions which were at least highly visible. This was informed by the move, too, begun in the Thatcher years, from arts administration implying public benefit to arts management on a business model. Agencies such as PADT were set up by the Arts Council through its regional organisation; but they were soon required to operate competitively on a business model, even against each other. In England, only Artists Agency in Sunderland (since renamed Helix Arts and relocated to Newcastle) retained its regional base, with long-term cooperation with other public-sector organisations.

the rest became national and international players in a market which gradually, and in a way through their own efforts, became closer to the global art market. That is, while agencies such as PADT did improve the quality - for example, in terms of reliability - of the commissioning process so that clients could be more confident in dealing with artists (not all of whom are or were then spendthrift alcoholics), they were also able to increase the level of commission budgets, by drawing on a wide range of public- and private-sector sources. Hence artists of international recognition, also likely to be represented by major galleries, were drawn into the process. At the same time, many local authorities joined the expansion of public art by appointing in-house public art officers, dispensing with the services of agents and perhaps looking more to local than mainstream artworld agendas. Meanwhile, with the establishment of a national lottery as an arts funding source far larger than the Arts Council, agencies were eclipsed, too, by individual (and individualist) art consultants building up a client base whose lottery bids they wrote (often in unrealistic terms). PADT seemed caught between a move to a more corporate way of operating and its public-sector roots, neglecting the needs of the latter to the extent that it lost its London Arts funding in 2001, closing in 2003. If this was a consequence of specific shifts in cultural policy and funding, it also reflects a failure among public art agencies to resolve a basic conflict between public art's aesthetic and social values. there appear to be three competing aims: first, and most radically, to democratise cultural production; second, to extend the public for the kinds of art favoured by guardians such as the Arts Council; and third, to act as a socio-economic agency working through cultural mediation. In its last days, PADT tended to the last of those aims, having begun in the second. But what can we learn from this history now?

## **A distanced viewpoint**

The PADT archive moved to the Henry Moore Institute in 2005. Seeing material from it exhibited in glass cases in Leeds this summer gave me a feeling, as said above, that the terrain the archive represents is encapsulated in history. More than 40 years after the inception of public art as a specialist mode of cultural production - in the National Endowment for the Arts' funding programme for art in public places in 1967 - it has the (to me dated) air of a kind of urban redevelopment reliant on material intervention in geographical spaces, which is probably over now, the financial crisis drawing a line under it. Patricia Phillips questioned this basis for public art, arguing that public space has a socio-psychological dimension more interesting and effective than its physical sites, in a seminal essay in *Artforum* in 1989;<sup>3</sup> today, a harsher economic context and the rapid advance of immaterial production (in digital arts, for example), and growth of a dissident art of largely collaborative practice outside or subverting the artworld,<sup>4</sup> implies that urban change will be marked less by public art projects which have been hitherto used to mask the consumerist ethos of city-centre redevelopment, and more by a direct appeal to the consumption culture marketed by the global entertainment, news and information sector. Art outside the system is marginal, but its marginality is the window for its criticality. PADT, in contrast, sought to be an insider organisation, working with government and commerce to expand art's audiences, but equally driven by the imperative to find its next budget.

The letters, contracts, sketches and visualizations (pre-digital, and several with hand-written notes), maquettes, publications, and other traces of the day-to-day work of a London-based commissions agency takes on the air of a past which, while well within living memory, including mine, needs to be documented, sorted and catalogued for

future researchers simply because the world in which it arose and by which it was validated has changed. The archive offers researchers insights which are more reliable than the reminiscences of the individuals involved, and more detailed than those of the still scant published literature. At the same time, the gallery discussion animated the material through, not exactly reminiscence on the parts of contributors, but more their interactions and critical reflections. Whatever its problems, public art was a new, major area of practice between the 1960s and the 1990s, and the availability of this archive will be valuable for researchers. Those who remember the period will be able to test their retrospective views against documentary evidence, and future researchers will bring new questions arising from new contexts.

The PADT archive is particularly useful because the commissioning practices which it documents were often not fully documented by artists, nor by some over-stretched arts organisations (or the Arts Council). Much has yet to be sorted and catalogued in the 176 boxes of material, and some boxes, or items in them, are incorrectly labelled. A task of major proportions lies ahead, I hope including transfer to a digital medium to enable remote access to the archive. This would inform and encourage face-to-face discussions in which academics and professionals draw on the archive to add to their awareness of the cultural environment and issues of the period it covers.

To go beyond a polemics of public art, the detail provided by the archive is essential. Similarly, to go beyond polemics in today's aesthetic debates, for example via the relational aesthetic advanced by Jacques Rancière and Nicolas Bourriaud,<sup>5</sup> it is helpful to compare that with the different relational contexts which shaped public art in the late twentieth century. That public art has had a chequered reception by artists,

critics, curators and the publics for whom it was intended adds to its historical interest. But it is equally interesting to see how commissions were moulded by the realities of a budget, a planning regime, and a fabrication process; and by the perceptions of clients and artists - differences between which PADT attempted to resolve. PADT was able to relieve artists of some of the day-to-day work of progressing a commission, by acting for them, just as it sought to retain the confidence of clients. It also dealt with press contacts, though art critics tended to divide between those who supported adventurous commissioning, such as Richard Cork, and those who saw it as compromising artistic autonomy (a legacy of modernism). This raises the question as to whether public art was an extension of the modernism epitomised by the isolated objects and white walls of the Museum of Modern Art, New York (MoMA) and its successors, or whether it was instead a departure from the modernist trajectory. Gormley's *One & Other* draws attention to another question: the extent to which public art now renews the tradition of the public monument. I return to this below. First I want to look in more detail at some of the commissions documented in the archive, as presented in the exhibition.

### **A triangulation**

Speaking in the gallery discussion, Hannah Collins saw the site of public art as less a geographical entity than a metaphorical location of culture for a specific public. For Vong Phaophanit, the physical site of his *Ash Wall* in Woolwich was a reality loaded with the evidence of uneven benefit in urban redevelopment. And for Michael Sandle, the site for his bronze Saint George and the dragon outside a corporate headquarters in Blackfriars itself offers a history, through buildings and the sculptures commissioned for them in previous centuries.

Collins worked with PADT on a commission for a north London hospital, inviting elderly residents to contribute one item (of meaning to them) to a collective display. The result was a wide range of objects, from key rings to postcards and items of bric-a-brac, placed on shelves, photographed, and exhibited on-site in the (then innovative) form of large-format transparencies on light boxes. Collins offered the idea for others to take up, though she remarked that projects tended to be seen as finished once the art appeared on the wall. Asked by PADT for another proposal, this time without a brief, Collins put forward a Childrens' Museum, which could be sited anywhere a host could be found. Four boxes of objects exemplify what might be the contents of such a museum, again on the basis of personal donation. In the gallery discussion, Collins wondered if digital media would now take such a project beyond the limitations of a physical site and attendant bureaucracy.

Phaophanit's commission occurred early in his career, a major opportunity at the time. In the gallery, beside a macquette for the work, he related how he wanted to bring the visual aspect of the shining glass towers seen across the Thames (in Docklands) to the marginalised south bank. The glass wall used laminated sheets without visible joining structures, encasing silk on one side and ash on the other, orange and grey (perhaps unconsciously like the two banks of the river). From a distance the wall seemed solid; on approach a section was seen to be detached, standing in front to reveal a way through. The form of the work appears almost neoclassical while Phaophanit sees the bright orange of the silk as referencing the culture of Laos, his birthplace. This did not appeal to local youths, who shot at the wall with air rifles. The archive includes letters from PADT to a contractor concerning the work's demolition in 1996. There is, too, an invoice for £4,324 - paid by the local authority. This was the kind of difficulty

which agencies were paid to avoid, though it might also be argued that their role as intermediary detracted from the artist's direct engagement with the (both legal and emotional) owners of the site.

Michael Sandle's sculpture of Saint George killing a dragon is, paradoxically, the closest of the projects presented in the exhibition to the tradition of the monument; yet at the same time - confirmed in his verbal commentary - the most subversive. Sandle noted that in a preliminary sketch the dragon was winning the fight, and represented Mrs Thatcher. The final version draws on sources from existing equine sculptures on other buildings nearby; and public monuments such as Emmanuel Fremiet's *Joan of Arc* (1874) at Place des Pyramides, Paris<sup>6</sup> (seen as a student in Paris). Yet Sandle's aim was to introduce a new take on a subject-matter so familiar as to be dismissed as a remnant of the nineteenth century. He says, 'Saint George is not a nice officer chap. He usually looks as if he's playing polo ... as if he couldn't knock the skin off a rice pudding. Mine is an NCO type ... a really nasty piece of work. He's got to be ...'<sup>7</sup>

The sculpture invites speculation, seeming to be conventional but becoming ... difficult in its reading. Yet the form accommodates the architecture of the building on Dorset Rise in front of which it stands, as was taken to be good practice in public art. The rectilinear windows are referenced in the grid through which the dragon attempts to rise, for example. Not surprisingly, Sandle has a high regard for Charles Jagger's *Artillery Memorial* in Hyde Park, with its realism - a radical statement in comparison with the abstraction of Lutyens' *Cenotaph* (initially intended as a temporary work, to last a few years only). One of the four supporting figures in Jagger's bronze and stone monument is dead, his helmet on his chest. Neither monument proposes a narrative of glory, but Jagger's is purposively non-glorious, and not open-ended either.

## **Autonomy and sociation**

The three cases above triangulate tensions: between the monument and art, between the aesthetic and social dimensions of art in a public site, and between the permanent and the mutable. From the 1990s, public art agencies began to favour the temporary commission because it avoided some of the difficulties of the planning process and possible public outcry. Perhaps programmes of such commissions were also close to the model of the gallery mixed show, as agents sought the status of curators. This, if my perception is accurate, fuelled a move back to autonomy but at a time when the boundaries of art, media, fashion, architecture and entertainment were rapidly being removed in gallery-based contemporary art. The divide between gallery-based and non-gallery art has also become less important since the period covered by the archive, and in a way it was always illusory. Bill Woodrow, for example, was principally an artist who saw his work in studio and gallery settings, and was unsuccessful (as he stated in the gallery discussion in Leeds) in adapting his ideas to the requirements of clients - as in a competition for a work on a roundabout in Lewisham in 1995. He did, however, make a work for the empty plinth in Trafalgar Square, as one of three commissions which followed a feasibility study carried out by PADT in 1997. Perhaps Woodrow is outside the debate which preoccupied agencies such as PADT as to how public art could become a new, specialist profession. But his stance also, in retrospect, redirects attention to the weakness of that aspiration, to the impossibility of squaring the circle of modernist autonomy and public accountability. In a way, Gormley's use of the site in 2009 affirms a reunion between public and gallery art. Meanwhile, collectives such as Free in Sheffield, Ala Plastica in Buenos Aires,<sup>8</sup> and WochenKlausur in Vienna,<sup>9</sup> have evolved ways of working as artists while moving closer to activism.

Art, like everything else in a culture, moves on. This does not mean its histories cease to be of interest to artists (as well as historians), nor that the problems of past art are solved in new departures. Today, in a gloomy period politically, the problem of art's criticality, dividing into aesthetic and social contexts, is more urgent than in the less hectic days when PADT was established. Part of the value of the archive is that it will enable researchers to unearth the contradictions which always permeated the field of commissioning, and the dearth of cases of demonstrably successful public art. There are some cases where a work has attracted diverse and engaged publics, such as Maya Lin's *Vietnam Veterans' Memorial* in Washington DC, but not many. Examination of the contents of the archive will illuminate the failure. Even more, comparison with older material at the Henry Moore Institute, around Moore himself perhaps, may lend illumination to how some works gain enduring public respect.

No art is timeless, but some art has a strong enough relation to the conditions of its production, and to the conditions, too, of human reception of art, that it can last. I do not mean by this that any art has an automatic or non-specific capacity to engage any public; quite the contrary, the engagement is always specific to the parties involved. But it may be time to revisit some of the arguments and assertion put forward by art critic Peter Fuller in the 1980s, around the accessibility of art dealing with explicitly human conditions, as in images of a mother-and-child - or evoking the transitional and metaphorical space between a mother and her infant.<sup>10</sup> Fuller linked art to the idea of a potential space as it was discussed by psychoanalyst D W Winnicott,<sup>11</sup> alluding in his art criticism to the deep space of paintings by Mark Rothko and Robert Natkin. Fuller did not go into the gendering of the genre, on which Luce Irigaray remarks in

her call to put images of the Mother-Daughter couple in public places.<sup>12</sup> If I seem to go wide of the issue here it is because, near the end of this text, histories of art in public places seem to me to show its separation from deep issues of cultural reception. In a probably superficial way, Gormley does engage with them in his body-casts, the human form standing before the human spectator. The same cannot be said of the now ubiquitous bronze figures of writers and entertainers - Carry Grant in Bristol, for instance - beside which tourists are photographed (as if star-dust rubs off). The lack of a plinth does not detract from the status of stardom, and such objects do not give form to the desires of the public but present them with the requirements of the global media industry.<sup>13</sup>

But I want to end by returning to Gormley, who brings art to a mass audience (through the press and broadcasting for the most part) while using a public monument which, in a contemporary view, might be said to elucidate the difficulties of making monuments now. The plinth is contextualised by references to high culture (the National Gallery) and high history (statues of rulers and military figures); perhaps part of the attraction for some participants - who become quasi-living statues - is to assimilate themselves in the history represented by such institutions and such monuments. For others it may be to subvert or lampoon a threadbare national narrative. In most cases, it offers an opportunity to communicate a personal message to the media (and any tourists present below the plinth). Victor Martinez, for example, wore a white hat and jacket over a yellow waistcoat and blue jeans, displaying a sign saying 'Less BNP More Tea'<sup>14</sup> Christine Sharman, from Wakefield, promoted the Workers Educational Association. She described the experience as 'exhilarating ... a wonderful pigeon's eye view in the rain and the wind and the sunshine.'<sup>15</sup> To an

extent, here, the personal is political, as feminists argued through the 1980s. I wish there had been more discussion of that in public art's circles at the time, more understanding that public issues were not only the issues determined by the state and capital but by citizens as well. Looking back, Patricia Phillips was accurate in her comment (referenced above) that public art's site needed to be the contest of public rights and ownership of city spaces. But this was an antagonistic position, and agencies such as PADT were under pressure to operate as businesses, which they could thus not translate into the commissioning process when a bad press for a project might wreck the prospect for the next budget. In the retrospect allowed by access to the PADT archive, such limitations can be both identified and understood, which may inform another generation of arts professionals seeking to situate art between its aesthetic conventions and its social production and reception.

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<sup>1</sup> Lacy, S. *Mapping the Terrain*, Seattle, Bay Press, 1995

<sup>2</sup> Sassen, S. *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*, Princeton, Princeton University Press

<sup>3</sup> Phillips, P. 'Out of Order: the public art machine', *Artforum*, Dec. 1988, pp. 283-308

<sup>4</sup> Miles, M. 'Aesthetics in a Time of Emergency' *Third Text*, vol. 23, 4. July 2009, pp. 421-434

<sup>5</sup> Rancières, J. *The politics of aesthetics*, London, Continuum, 2004; Bourriaud, N. *Relational Aesthetics*, Dijon, Les presses réel, 2002

<sup>6</sup> Michalski, S. *Public Monuments: Art in political bondage 1870-1997*, London, Reaktion, 1998, Ch.1

<sup>7</sup> Michael Sandle, from press release, *The Independent*, May 1987, cited in 'Art in Public Places' catalogue, 2009, p. 4

<sup>8</sup> see Miles, 'Aesthetics in a Time of Emergency'

<sup>9</sup> Kester, G. *Conversation Pieces: Community and communication in modern art*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004, pp. 97-111

<sup>10</sup> Fuller, P. *Art and Psychoanalysis*, London, Readeres and writers Cooperative, 1980, Ch. IV

<sup>11</sup> Winnicott, D.W. *Home is Where We Start From: Essay by a psychoanalyst*, Harmondsworth,

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Penguin, 1986

<sup>12</sup> Irigaray, L. 'A Chance to Live', in *Thinking the Difference: For a peaceful revolution*, London, Athlone, 1994, pp. 3-36

<sup>13</sup> see Adorno, T.W. 'The schema of mass culture' in *The Culture Industry: Selected essays on mass culture*, London, Routledge, 1991, pp. 53-84

<sup>14</sup> illustrated, *The London Paper*, 7 July 2009, p. 6

<sup>15</sup> cited and illustrated, *The Guardian*, 7 July, 2009, p. 19