

Afterlife

by Peter Dunn

One day, amid a flurry of publicity, the public artwork appeared. It was unusual, and no one seemed to know where it came from or why it was there. When all the hullabaloo died down — some people wrote to the press saying it was ugly and a waste of money, others said it was beautiful, cheap at the price — it sat there silently, demanding interpretation. It remained a curiosity for a while but then people lost interest, except to give directions by saying, turn left by the strange metal thing .

This may be a caricature but it is not so far from the experience of many members of the public when a public artwork arrives in their midst. Most people are curious and want to know what the work is about, even if they don't like it on first sight. In many cases this curiosity remains unchannelled. In the above scenario, there are several missed opportunities. The first is in the failure to get people involved in a discussion about why a public artwork should be created for them — the public - in the first place. That surely strikes at the heart of the matter. If they are not engaged at that stage then, quite rightly, there is confusion about who the work is really for. Suspicion about motives fuels hostility. Confusion around meaning then follows. Are those who determined the meanings — perhaps the commissioners, the artist — speaking to or for themselves? If they claim to be speaking to the public, which public? Why, or what, do they want to communicate? Why isn't the communication clear? If people feel excluded, the work symbolises that exclusion, writ large in public.

Ideally, the process should start with a public desire for the work that continues and is never sated while the work, or the memory of it, exists. The artist's work begins with developing or creating that desire, continues engagement through the design process through to production, generates anticipation during installation, and enables the desire for interpretation and reinterpretation. The process may not be easy, it is about change and as such can be difficult as well as rewarding. In short it is about *continuing discovery* for both artists and participants/audience. The question of for whom is then clear.

Words such as *consultation*, *participation* and *ownership*, once consigned to the derogatory margins of Community Art, are now buzzwords in Public Art parlance. The more cynical would point to funding agencies and commissioners being more concerned with heading off criticism — adverse press reaction about use of public money — than with a genuine desire to engage. However, despite liberal doses of tokenism, there is a growing recognition that there is value in such an approach, if only on a practical level of reducing vandalism. Unfortunately, in too many cases, the responsibility ends there. On completion the funding finishes, the

commissioner has delivered, the artist is on to the next project. Minimum maintenance is the desired afterlife .

It is accepted that the desire for interpretation and reinterpretation, continuing discovery, is what the artist experiences through the continuum of practice. It is seldomly acknowledged, concretely and proactively, that structures and processes are needed for an artwork to act as a vehicle for continuing discovery by its public. After all, shouldn't a good work of art do this by virtue of its excellence alone? If it doesn't, it's the artist's fault. Everyone else is off the hook. This is rather familiar. When it was unfashionable to value - and therefore to fund - *consultation and participation*, it was the artist's fault if the work wasn't good enough for people to bond it with immediately upon birth; it was a flawed conception. Alternatively, if the work was fashionably avant guard , the work was regarded as being before its time and the public were inadequate nurturers. The funders and commissioners were once again off the hook. Whilst attitudes may have changed to consultation and involvement prior to the work's completion, such notions are still too prevalent in relation to so-called afterlife .

The term afterlife itself is a misnomer, implying that the real life of a work finishes when it is completed and sited. But that is when it begins. Like most new life, its early stages require nurturing. Its passage into the social world is made easier if there are support structures that enable it to optimise its potential. Within gallery and institutional contexts this is understood. Yet within the public domain, which has more fragile constituencies for maintaining engagement with artworks, funders and commissioners seldom take that responsibility seriously. I don't wish to push the life metaphor too far here, suffice it to say that artworks are not simply a configuration of materials but exist, and provide a focus, within a matrix of social meaning. *Whatever other site considerations there may be, artworks are made to interact primarily with human sensibilities. That is their purpose; the meaning of their life .*

There may be a grain of truth in the view that a good work of art should, with little assistance, be capable of provoking, seducing, evoking or eliciting, public response. But it is not that simple. A lot of support work, usually undertaken by the artist, remains unacknowledged as integral to the work's success. Let us take the strategy of provocation, a much abused but perfectly legitimate approach in certain circumstances. Firstly, the form and content of the work needs to be designed to elicit the desired response. Secondly it is important to attract other means of communication, such as the press, to draw wider attention. Managing this, to create the right kind of debate and discussion is far from simple. Knowledge about how these other media operate is essential, because the issues will inevitably be distorted through the lens of their particular culture. Artists who are successful in utilising provocation as a strategy, study and involve themselves in that culture because it provides the nourishment for the work's growth . Of course not all works involve such an overt confrontational

strategy, they may for example be contemplative, about a more consensual sense of identity or celebration. Although it has to be acknowledged that one constituency's celebration may be another's provocation. The point is, *creating a successful work of art is not just about the making, it is about contextualising.*

This needs to be approached holistically. The process begins by preparing the ground. A site is not (just) physical, it is social. Whatever the form the artwork takes - whether it is material or virtual - it exists within a matrix of overlapping constituencies. Many artists have a sense of what these constituencies might be, but research is crucial. Preparatory work begins with the primary constituencies, those closest to centre of the matrix. There is a range of strategies involving consultation, liaison, or more direct engagement through brainstorming concepts, to workshops engaged in design development or physical production. By publicising these activities, one signals both the impending arrival of the artwork and that it is already engaging its primary constituencies. Once the work is sited, the next phase begins. Again there are a number of ways to approach this, ranging from well-briefed and well-informed media coverage, creation of web sites, books, CDs, videos, to structured visits, talks and the development or extension of projects based upon the work and/or its themes. It is not necessary that the artist is involved in all this but important that s/he is involved in at least the thinking around it from the beginning, from conception to realisation. It is, however, important for funders and commissioners to recognise that a maintenance schedule is not simply about physical care but should include social engagement.

As James Marriott from Platform said about their project, Delta in the Wandle Valley, The real sculpture is a continuing dialogue. The object produced as part of this work was a micro-hydro turbine which provides power to light some buildings in the nearby St. Joseph's School. The movement of the tides triggers a bell that rings its high and low points. The old sluice gate was painted gold in remembrance of the Bronze-age depositions of precious objects in the river in homage of its importance as life-giver. It is surmounted by a carved stone entablature with the names of animals that have lived there and will hopefully return. The work is not about a turbine. It began with researching the history and possible futures for use of the river. The work became a catalyst for gatherings of groups and individuals who combined to try and improve the river, The Wandle Delta Network. An education project — Tides & Tributes — followed, a video, a teachers pack, a poster, an information resource, a specially composed musical performance for the opening of the new school. There have followed political struggles with the local council over the raising of a weir downstream which stops the turbine working, causes silatation, loss of habitat and pollution. All of this has contributed to the setting up a Renewable Energy group in the area which since has developed into a large charity realising a network of schemes such as a solar powered pub, a partly solar powered school, a renewably assisted College and a completely self-sufficient renewable energy and resource centre. The

artwork was about harnessing and focusing energies which rippled out, engaging people in a variety of ways and continues to do so. Needless to say most of the time, energy and creativity which Platform put into this project was not funded.

Similarly, the work of The Art of Change derives from the imaginative interpretation of meanings embodied in ideas about change, the distillation of the desires of a constituency in a form that expresses those ideas symbolically and actively. This is a process of transformation through critique, collaboration and communication. It involves social and visual processes inextricably linked. In a sense, the work forms a 'lens' which creates a focal point in the energies of transformation. We use the focus of *Agenda 21* - the Agenda for the 21st Century that came out of the Rio 'Earth Summit'- as the basis of a holistic approach. This enables us to draw together uses of renewable energy, sustainable materials, community involvement and identity. Sustainability is about cultural, as well as biological, diversity. For example in a recently completed project in Wymering, Portsmouth, we began working with the Community Association when they were planning the building of a new Community & Sport Centre, thinking about how that might both materially and symbolically impact upon the communities and constituencies of Wymering. Issues of quality of life, ownership and identity were central to these discussions, the history and potentials for the future. They immediately recognised the value of a sustainable approach, both from an economic and symbolic standpoint as their legacy to the future generations of Wymering. Following a trip to the Alternative Technology Centre at Machynlleth, work began on altering the design of the building and in creating a series of related artworks in the Centre and its grounds that would embody Agenda 21 principles and project the presence and identity of the Centre outward to the wider community. A visual narrative of approach was developed, from the distant view of a landmark, leading one progressively to the heart of the building. Other, local, artists were involvedⁱⁱⁱ in brainstorming with the community over a Wymering Weekend and the project began to take shape. There followed a series of workshops, involving 237 local residents and 215 school children, to refine the ideas and a successful Arts Lottery bid was made, scoring ten out of ten for community involvement. From early on, reminiscence and local history work began, generating a photo-archive and chronicles of events that informed all other projects and became a valued resource in itself. This has now been taken over and extended by local residents. The artworks continued to develop through consultation and workshops until completion. The landmark concept developed into *The Wymering Tree*, a 14 meter 'Tree of Life', symbolising both sustainability and the generations that form the Wymering community. It is also a 'windmill' - generating power using the latest technologies while continuing the historic use of windmills on Portsdown hill. The trunk has seven facets with a double helix (representing DNA) running through it. It has seven main branches and seven minor branches; the mobile elements signify the four seasons. The colour of the lighting is determined by wind direction. Along the western perimeter of the site is the 90 metre long serpentine *Wymering Wall*. It contains carved and

moulded brick and ceramic produced through workshops, materials found on site such as flints, and draws on the bricklaying and building skills of local people. It includes an archway with spiral columns reflecting the tree of life motif, with a crafted steel gate based on an image from the Reminiscence Project of the tunnels in the hillside used as air-raid shelters during the War. Leading from through arch is 92 metre pedestrian pathway, incorporating sandblasted images and a range of textural materials reflecting Wymering's past and present, drawn out through workshops. The path winds through a series of earthworks and landscaping of the grounds, again based on ideas generated by the community with mounds and hollows for children to play in and planted with seven oak trees and the indigenous flora and fauna of the chalk downs. The path concludes at a 9 metre bridge - a 'bridge of memories' - across a hemispherical hollow in the chalk hillside. It is constructed of steel, glass, timber and ceramic. The glass elements contain images gathered from the reminiscence project. A fibre optic trail runs under the bridge here in blue ripples that will reflect off the white surface of the chalk. Inside the main hall of the Centre are 17 Wall Hangings which again have been made using elements designed in workshops and pick up on design elements used across the other art works. Made from felt, using reverse-appliqu techniques, the hangings add colour, meaning, and soften the acoustics.

This process has taken the communities of Wymering from operating out of a cramped and dilapidated hut with a crumbling asbestos roof to a thriving Community Centre with sports and arts facilities of regional importance. Those involved have become advocates of Agenda 21 and are conscious of the need to encourage other communities to engage in a similar process. As Chris Whittaker, the person now running the reminiscence project, said, I thought this art stuff was a load of old bollocks, but this project has changed my mind .

These are just two examples; there are many more that I do not have the space to discuss here. For example Artangel have created an afterlife collection of books, CDs and videos as an integral part of their temporary artwork programme. Artists Agency (renamed Helix Arts) see continuity activities as vital to all of the projects.

In making the arguments for institutional commitment to and funding for the processes of continuity , I am not, however, advocating a community care policy for artworks. I am not one of those who believe that artworks are forever, some clearly are just for Christmas (or the Millennium). I have no desire to resuscitate artworks that have outlived their useful life. In fact temporary artworks , so designated, do not suffer this afterlife problem because they are conceived as an interactive process from the outset. It is the label of permanent which attracts the afterlife dilemma; induces passive thinking. I believe that all artworks should be thought of as temporary, some short-life, others long-life. As such they have different rhythms of intensity and volume in the way they speak to us. The works of Masaccio and Piero Della Francesca are capable of highly animated

conversations with our generation, for very different reasons incidentally to those which gave them life in the first place. Their grounding in lived human experience enables them to make this transition, and of course they are carefully nurtured and reinterpreted within established institutional contexts. Even so, there was a time when these works were seen as barely articulate 'primitives', and there may come a time when they become inaudible again. They are venerable but not immortal. As an atheist, I do not believe in an afterlife. Dead is dead. I do however believe in recycling, so welcome new life from the ashes or compost of the old.

Peter Dunn, *The Art of Change*.

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ⁱ Peter Codling (Wall & Path), Anna Pottern & June Heap of Dot to Dot Arts (Wall Hangings and Reminiscence) Janice Shales (Bridge). Peter Dunn was lead artist and designed the Wymering Tree in Collaboration with Anne Thorne Architects.