

**Adding Value** Conference, Guildhall, Portsmouth, 1998.

## **Art in Parks.**

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### Introduction

Art has existed in public places for as long as such spaces have been described as 'public'. Within the mainstream Western Tradition, this domain has been predominantly urban or close to habitation, with the exception of territorial boundary markers or memorials (usually of battles). This may have something to say about our culture generally.

More specifically, it is clear that the function of public art, historically at least, has been to inspire social cohesion, to focus and embody social values, whether these be civic, religious, aristocratic or oligarchic, nationalistic or militaristic. Those who determined the meanings these works should convey were the commissioners.

In the Twentieth Century and more particularly in post war Britain, this was complicated by the stylistic dominance of Modernism together with the emergence of the 'arms length principle' in public funding. Control of the meaning of the art work was, formally at least, deemed to be the province of 'free artistic expression'. Business corporations or public bodies who wished to be regarded as forward looking embraced this new style because, in its abstraction, such work was 'meaningless' in traditional representational terms.

Rather its aspirational meanings were inscribed both in its forward looking "Modernism" and within its socially elitist context; it celebrated the power of the commissioner as one of the progressive elite. It still retained the old power relations between commissioner and audience but expressed them differently; gone were any attempts to persuade and inspire social cohesion - albeit from the top down - instead it became a statement of difference<sup>1</sup>.

More recently, public funding agencies have shown concern about public response. This is mainly because of the adverse reactions to such public art - especially when public money is involved - and partly out of the questioning of Modernism, the debates issuing from the constituencies of black arts, women's art and community art. Much of this institutional concern is tokenistic, being more about heading off criticism than a wish to truly engage such publics; nevertheless there is a noticeable shift in the climate. Words such as *participation*, *consultation* and *ownership*, once consigned to the derogatory margins of 'Social Service art'<sup>2</sup> are now buzzwords in Public Art parlance. There are at least the beginnings of a move to make art works which deal with the

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<sup>1</sup> This does not refer to the intention of the artists, which may have run counter to this, but to the Corporate and institutional contexts which coded the work.

<sup>2</sup>"Social Service Art" was most frequently applied to Community Arts but has also been used pejoratively against artists who work with marginalised or disenfranchised sectors of society.

aspirational values of the communities and constituencies in which they are placed.

With the extension of 'public space' from the urban into the countryside through the establishment of National and Regional Park authorities, and the expansion of the tourist industry, the tradition of the 'sculpture garden' has been expanded into the 'sculpture park'. Public art has added a cultural dimension to the 'countryside experience'. Its audiences are no longer those who live or work in the vicinity but the tourist, the visitor, those 'in pursuit of leisure'. Accessibility is the watchword.

What then is the relationship of such work to its publics?. Is it simply to provide visual spice to the countryside experience as a tourist attraction? Is it to mediate between the 'social' and the 'natural'; to humanise and (given our dominant culture) urbanise such environments together with trails and convenience facilities to make nature more palatable; commodify it <sup>3</sup> ?.

The issue art's relationship to its publics is complex, regardless of its location. The recent genre of 'Public Art' is further complicated by the mediation of professional art agencies who increase the 'arms length' separation of artist from commissioner.

Who the commissioner is, is also blurred by complex funding partnership arrangements: this can involve a Local Authority, Single Regeneration Budgets or the European 'Objective' funds, Lottery, Charitable Trusts and/or private sponsorship. All of these wish to see 'outputs' fitting their criteria. Before artists begin the process of building any relationship to a public constituency they are often faced with navigating the demands of all these 'investors' and mediators, all of whom have more tangible power than the - often as yet unknown - public.

### The Art of Change - Collaborations

The Art of Change is a visual arts organisation concerned with issues of change, particularly its impact on identities, quality of life and the environment. We use the focus of Agenda 21 - the agenda for the 21st Century that came out of the Rio Earth Summit - to pull together the strands of Art, Ecologies, Cultures and Change, through interdisciplinary practice.

There is little doubt that the key issues of ecology, sustainability, urban crisis, cultural and racial tensions, are becoming increasingly urgent as we approach the Millennium. By their very nature they require an interdisciplinary approach and an international dimension.

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<sup>3</sup> .See Raymond William's seminal work *Town and Country*, also *Culture and Key Words* by the same author in exploring the genealogy of the term 'Culture' in relation to 'Agriculture'; the humanisation of nature, ranging in degree between nurturing and controlling in much the same way as contemporary cultural forms may be used.

Our approach is a philosophy-in-practice of an *art of engagement*: concerned with ideas, issues, processes and products of transformation. It is people centred and critical. By critical we mean that meanings and identities should not be prey to superficial stereotypes, that mechanisms and processes are established to allow the lived, changing, complex and problematised identities to emerge. It is about empowerment. In that sense it is a political statement as much as an artistic one.

Our work is collaborative for the reasons discussed above but also because we want to ensure that it is as precise and appropriate as possible. That means working with those who have first hand knowledge of what is needed, whether they be activists, professionals, or someone who has relevant personal experiences.

Change is about inspiration and aspiration. This, we believe, results from a transformation through critique, collaboration and communication. It involves social and visual processes inextricably linked, forming a 'lens' which creates a focal point in the energies of transformation.

A critical practice is not simply about a critique of what is, the point is to construct new models, to begin to create stepping stones in the pathway to a different future. Collaborations are both the means and the end.

Public Art, Public engagement.

The way we involve people is of course customised according to the particularity of each project, however some common threads can be identified

*Structuring engagement* : what we call a 'New Narrative' Approach. This is an approach derived from debates around photography and new media, an approach based upon non-linearity and customisation. Whether it is a Billboard Project, a CD ROM, an net project or a Public Art Project like Wymering , our approach is - through consultation - to create a framework, a matrix of information related to an overarching concept or theme - in the case of Wymering, Agenda 21 pulled together the local and global, with interweaving narrative strings from history, future aspirations, the relationships between generations - a whole range of identity issues.

This matrix then becomes the vessel for specific inputs from other participants - these may be other professionals, artists, or those who have specialist knowledge or first hand experience of the issues or themes being explored (i.e. active members of a constituency or 'community of interest' - - in this case the community of Wymering )

These participants input in a 'site specific' way - site specific in this sense is not simply physical or geographic but more in the Foucault's sense (as a node or 'position' in spheres of intersecting discourses, of the particular, the social, ideological, of local and global ripples of power).

It is this specificity that introduces the lived, complex and changing representations and signifiers which provide 'meaning' and a sense of the 'authentic' for those participating.

Those who interact with this matrix, whether they be directly producing or consuming are nevertheless actively engaged in customising their 'journey' through the matrix, in making their own 'sense' of the narrative which they create or navigate for themselves - either in the making of the work or visiting it after completion.

In our work we have identified *three main levels of engagement*:

1. Primary - those involved quite closely in production processes - either in intellectual production - constructing meanings in consultation/collaboration, or involvement in the physical construction of the work or elements within it; or indeed both.
2. Secondary - Wider public who may interact directly with the work but more in the role of 'consumers' either actively or passively
3. Tertiary - through different medium: trade/art magazines, through forms of documentation, slide-talks, lectures, conferences etc. - usually with specialist audiences

There is also an issue here about 'communities' and constituencies, some definition is called for.

As far as we are concerned there are only 'communities of interest'. Classical sociology divides communities into three types: geographic communities, communities of identity and communities of interest

However, we believe - with Raymond Williams's - that 'community' is a dynamic process inextricably bound to the process of communication - just because people live in the same geographic location does not make them a community. Just because people are ascribed an identity - for example black or gay - does not make them a community, not until they choose to engage with others in exploring, challenging or redefining that identity.

As Raymond Williams says in *Culture & Society*

*"The process of communication is the process of community: the sharing of common meanings and thence common activities and purposes"* (these are the sustaining elements which nurture and consolidate meanings, norms and values); *"the reception and comparison of new meanings, leading to the tensions and achievements of growth and change"*. (these are the transformative elements which generate aims and goals - direct its becoming)

This concept of community is not sited in neighbourhoods, although 'place' can be a focus for it. It is a dynamic of interlocking and overlapping spheres of discourse. A tension between inclusion and exclusion.

It is also important to *implicate ourselves* in this process..... we need to implicate ourselves because there is a lot of 'they' terminology used when discussing 'community' - from this view communities are euphemisms for those who are a problem, the marginalised, disaffected, deprived, incompetent. It avoids the fact that the communities or constituencies we may belong to are in competition for resources with those 'other' communities; that we win, they lose. It's more comforting to regard 'them' as being in a different category: a more simple, less sophisticated, sometimes even in a kind of 'noble savage' category that we can feel sorry for, do-good to, but not implicate ourselves in.

The process of implicating ourselves is quite simple to say, less simple to do:

- 1) recognise what communities or constituencies we actually belong to,
- 2) those we want to belong to or ally ourselves with,
- 3) identify other constituencies or communities who may be open to dialogue and exchange - to network.

This means making choices and being clear about them. You can't please everyone. If you are an artist working in the public domain, it goes without saying that anything that you do which is in any way challenging is going to generate hostility from some quarters. One community's celebration can be another's provocation. And this raises the thorny *issue of identity*

Instead of addressing the issue of identity theoretically I'd like tell you a story - about a number of different ways of engaging with people. It's about the Wymering Project in Portsmouth, I've chosen this because it gets closest so far to the more holistic approach we at The Art of Change are trying to develop. I'm using it as an example of a process. It also illustrates the more general principles discussed earlier and concerns about the process of engagement, - about interactivity and new narrative structures, how identities are shifting within new relations between the global and local, the impact of emerging technologies and sustainability.

So here we go....Once upon a time, about two years ago, I was asked to speak at a conference - Portsmouth Tomorrow. Instead of just asking me to talk about our work, they asked if I'd spend a week working with Wymering Community Association - who had just received sports lottery funding for a new community and sports centre. At first I was a bit dubious about what could be achieved in such a short period of time - but I thought that here is community already focused on change, and they may be therefore be open to widening the scope of that change. I was right. They had a lot of energy, commitment and ideas.

The first problem however was that - although they had capital for the building, they weren't sure at that time about revenue to run the place. So my first concern was to address the economic base - if they don't know if they can run the building they may see involving art as something of a diversion - at least in the first instance. We discussed (from my experience

of working with community groups in Docklands) issues around community economy. And from their into issues of sustainability and Agenda 21 - how the building might be designed, without significant increase in cost , to reduce energy and running costs. We then went on to discuss other aspects of Agenda 21 - that it concerns issues of community identity, stakeholding etc. and some ways that could be used to give what was essentially an off-the-shelf council building, an identity, their identity.

From there we discussed ways of doing that - thinking about the important 'narratives' of the place around its past, present and future. How different generations they perceive their identity. How that particular community fits into and is perceived by the rest of Portsmouth and how it linked, as a port, to the global in the past and it's painful transition into the future- (closure of the docks, unemployment etc. ) We also talked about things such as how you would approach the physical site, what they wished to be seen at what stages to project the images, the statements they wished to make. It was also useful that there was an enthusiastic Agenda 21 officer at the council who took the project to heart and helped in all kinds of ways. And a committed arts officer - Chris Carrell - who pushed things through the council.

To cut a long story short, the ideas were presented at the conference, the Arts Development Officer was enthusiastic about them and I was asked back to develop them further. After more discussions with the Community Association - who , when asked what they wanted to prioritise from their 'wish list', said "We want it all - it's a complete scheme " - it was decided to develop an Arts lottery bid.

Once the project - the opportunity - was created other artists were introduced into the process through a weekend of brainstorming where it was decided who would further explore the sites and concepts developed with the community. The artists were funded by City Arts to further develop these ideas themselves, directly with the Community Association and through a series of workshops involving the wider community, changing and developing them as they saw fit. They were actively encouraged and funded to develop their ideas and if necessary change the initial brief - the only condition was that they did this in consultation with the community. And there was agreement that where possible Agenda 21 principles should be adopted.

With City Arts help again, We were able to organise a trip to Macynlleth - the Centre for Alternative Technology - taking Councillors, members of the Community Association, the Artists, the Design Service team working on the building. We arranged a consultancy around redesigning the building according to Agenda 21 principles.

The artworks that developed were as follows:

1. The "Tree of Life' A large public artwork that can be seen from a distance, act as landmark and a symbol of energy sustainability in keeping with Agenda 21 'good practice'. It refers back to the history of the area (there was a windmill close by), taking the form of a windmill/ wind-generator, but will introduce contemporary forms and new technology as a means of relating it to the future and the Millennium development in Portsmouth Harbour. The 'tree' is a symbol of sustainability and the 'community trees', linking past and future generations . Artist: *Peter Dunn of The Art of Change*

2. A 'Wymering Wall' a 70 meter 'serpentine wall' on the road side perimeter, facing the neighbouring estate. It will use a wide range of materials including brick ceramic, stone, glass and steel. It will draw upon the bricklaying and building skills of local people, have elements embedded which will be made by children and parents from workshops. It will include an archway and gate at the start of the pathway. Artist: *Peter Codling*.

3. 'Earthworks' around the building, particularly the areas adjacent to the children's play area - something rather more ambitious and challenging than the usual 'landscaping'- and again draws on ideas developed through workshops. Artist: *Peter Codling*

4. Narrative Pathway stretching for 92 meters from the edge of the site to the community centre, incorporating images and textural elements reflecting something of Wymering's past, present sense of identity and desires for the future. Like the wall it will be constructed of various materials including fibre optic lighting. Artist: *Janis Shales*.

5. An Entrance Structure has mutated during workshops and discussions from a canopy above the entrance to 9 metre bridge across a hollow in the chalk hillside and a 'glass river' lit with fibre optics: it will be constructed of timber, steel, ceramic and etched glass - the designs based on a form of 'cognitive mapping' putting together places and formative events. Artist: *Janis Shales*.

6, Reminiscence project - collecting the life stories of local people that could feed into all the arts projects, create an archive and - put together with images on video - can also be used both in the community centre and local schools. This was begun by *Dot to Dot arts* but has now been effectively and enthusiastically taken over by *Chris Wittaker* from the Community Association.

7. Wall Hangings inside the building, in the main hall, which will contain images developed during workshops. Made from felt and other material, using applique and embroidery techniques, the hangings will add colour and help insulation and acoustics. Artists: *Anna Pottern and June Heap, Dot to Dot Arts*.

The team of artists all learned from each other, from the input of the Community, and Agenda 21 specialists - which is why we regard it as a basis for future ways of working.

A Project Co-ordinator from the community - *Chris Kearns* - was employed to act as liaison, organise workshops, venues, publicity etc. during the R & D phase. (The Art of Change prepared cash flows and schedules on information provided by the individual artists, co-ordinated materials and wrote the Lottery Bid, liaised with City Council and arranged 'milestone meetings' between artists, Leisure Services and Design Services to ensure that what the artists were planning could be fitted in with Building schedules and written into contracts, health and safety conditions etc. )

From the outset it was established that the Community Association was the commissioner; the lottery money goes to them and they pay the artists (including The Art of Change).

Evaluation is being done by Commedia - Francois Matarasso - who entered into the spirit of the whole thing and - through a series of workshops - established what indicators for monitoring and evaluation should be drawn up to measure success, qualitatively, in terms seen as relevant to all those involved at various stages. For example, on an individual/personal level, at group level - the Community Association - the impact upon the wider community of Wymering, how the artworks may impact upon their own perceptions of their community, how it might affect how other communities - Portsmouth - might regard them. How it might link to the Portsmouth Harbour Millennium. If the project may have any national or international ramifications. It's being monitored at various stages, and concluding a year after the works are installed.

The project Scored 10 out of 10 for Community Involvement from the Lottery Board - a first nationally - and received over £300,000. It's still in progress, and its not been without it's ups and downs ( elaborate if time) but were still hoping for the happy ending in the autumn of this year.