

Maximising Access, Photography and Public Art Photographers Gallery, London 1994

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"Does setting photographic images in a public space ensure greater access to art for a wider public?"

I don't think so. But is greater access to *Art* (as currently framed by our society) the real goal? For me, no. The question of access has to be situated in wider cultural & social context and placed within an extended notion of what art is or could be.

The meanings produced by the built environment are crucial to the quality of urban life. They are the visual signs and resonances of how we live and the value of that life. As such they are as important as economic activity, in that they may sustain our spirits, give us pleasure in the present and hope for the future. Negative meanings produced by our environment have the opposite effect. And economic activity without seeing and feeling the benefits is a promise postponed. Similarly, without economic transformation, these visual signs and symbols become negative - "gilding the ghetto" simply heightens cynicism and resentment. In short, cultural and economic transformations must go hand in hand to build confidence and *empower* people.

Public art has, in this century at least, played a patchy role in this process. I agree with Jonathan Harris when he says:

"Public art, like architecture, is the economic and intellectual property of a set of professional elites (planners, producers, critics), whose use of public resources generally has no recourse to any kind of democratic process".¹

Similarly Arthur Danto: "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".²

So there are two more crucial factors in the process if we are to avoid the problems outlined above: they are accountability and involvement.

The approach I'm interested in is site specific - in the full sense - people centred and critical. By critical I don't just mean going onto the attack (which may be necessary at times) but engaging in a process where meanings and identities are not prey to superficial stereotypes, a process that allows lived, changing and problematised identities to emerge - to create a sense of ownership, celebration and a sense of *becoming*.

¹ Jonathan Harris, Art Historian, The Guardian Sept. 26 1992, in response to an article on Richard Serra's sculpture at Broadgate, quoted in *Art in Public*, AN publications.

² Arthur Danto, art critic, quoted in *The City is a work of Art*, Scottish Sculpture Trust 1994.

To do this I think you have to be specific about who it is you are engaging - anything which isn't just bland and invisible is going to generate controversy - it's going to antagonise some and you have to be prepared for that

One final point about "communities" - I believe there are only communities of interest, or constituencies of shared discourses - this may focus around the issues of geographic place at times but not necessarily. These are not fixed, they are made up of overlapping spheres of discourse which are constantly in flux, both from within any particular grouping and respond to pressures and changes from without. So simplistic surveys are not a very useful means of understanding what is going on with any community - it takes real involvement, and time.

And most commissioning of public art works does not allow for this.

But I have to be practical; if I want to be a professional artist I need to work and earn money to live. It's no use being ideologically pure if no one will let me test my ideas in public.

This means, I believe, being as creative in your negotiating skills as in the production of the work - to be flexible enough and clear enough about what it is you want to achieve and what can be achieved in a given situation, to enable you to *maximise opportunities* without selling out the *kind of access* you want to achieve.