

Open Spaces Conference, Winchester 1996.

Notes:

¥ **Dissatisfied** with the way much of **Public Art is commissioned and used.**

¥ **Exploitative** for the **majority of artists, mitigates against real consultation.**

¥ tends to **use art as a band-aid** for badly designed public spaces or urban deprivation and is often a '**gilding the ghetto**' exercise.

¥ Regeneration Authorities seldom have sufficient funds to truly regenerate. materially and economically, so public art is used as a means of '**creating the right climate**' for the **holy grail of market led investment**, which most people now recognise as a myth of Thatcher-Reganism¹.

¥ the '**plonking**' of artworks - usually designed for gallery contexts² - **without considering a site holistically** results in **bad aesthetic solutions, negative public response** and **seldom produces a beautiful *place to be.***

¥ Recently, public **funding agencies have shown concern about public response** to such works.

¥ there are many reasons for this including the **questioning of Modernism** from many quarters, **both radical and reactionary**, but **mainly because of adverse publicity** around public funding of such works.

¥ Institutional concern **therefore tends to be tokenistic**, more concerned with **diverting criticism than a genuine wish to engage.**

¥ Nevertheless there is a **noticeable shift in climate.** Words such as **participation, consultation and ownership**, once consigned to the derogatory margins of 'social service art' are **now the buzz words of Public Art parlance.**

¥° It represents **at least the beginnings** of a move to make works which deal with the **aspirational values of the communities and constituencies in which they are placed.**

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 can sustain our spirits, give us pleasure in the present and hope for the future. Of course negative meanings produced by our environment have the opposite effect. Economic activity without seeing and feeling the benefits is a promise postponed. Similarly, without economic activity, these visual signs and symbols become an insult, simply heightening cynicism and resentment. In short the cultural and economic must go hand in hand to build confidence and empower the community. Public art, in this century at least has played a patchy role in this process³. So we have to add two more crucial factors if we are to avoid the problems outlined above: accountability and involvement.

Public Art, within the Western Tradition at least, is mainly assumed to be urban, with the exception of territorial markers or memorials. Its function historically has been to inspire social cohesion, to focus and embody social values, whether these be civic, religious, nationalistic or militaristic. Those who determined the meanings these works should convey were the commissioners.

In the Twentieth Century, this was complicated by the stylistic dominance of Modernism and the emergence of the 'arms length principle' in funding⁴. Control over meaning was, formally at least, seen as the province of 'free artistic expression', although the dominance of abstraction rendered such work 'meaningless' in traditional representational terms. Rather, its aspirational meanings were inscribed both in its forward looking "Modernism" and within its culturally elitist contexts: it celebrated the power of the commissioner as one of the progressive elite.⁵ Gone

were attempts to persuade and inspire social cohesion - albeit from the top down - instead it became a statement of difference.⁶

Our Green Chain consultancy for Lee Valley Park:

What was particularly interesting for us was addressing the issue of the **extension of 'public space' from the urban context into the countryside.**

With 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'**.

What is the **relationship between such work and its publics?** Is it to **provide visual spice to the countryside experience, 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; to commodify it?**⁷

We believe **Regional and National Parks are more important** than this. They present an opportunity to perform a **vital role both ecologically, culturally and socially.**

¹ We are talking about our experience in Britain, particularly with Government sponsored "City Challenge" initiatives, Urban Development Corporations and Housing Action Trusts, although we believe there are similar examples in the US.

² With the mistaken belief that simply 'scaling up' an artwork makes it work 'outside' the gallery or studio context.

³"Public art, like architecture, is the economic and intellectual property of a set of professional elites (planners, producers and critics), whose use of public resources generally has no recourse to any kind of democratic process".(Jonathan Harris, Art Historian, The Guardian, Sept. 26 1992, in response to an article on Richard Serra's sculpture at Broadgate, London). "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". Arthur Danto, art critic, quoted in *The City as a work of Art*, Scottish Sculpture Trust 1994.

⁴ Particularly in post war Britain with the establishment of the Arts Council of Great Britain but this model also has been adopted elsewhere, in Canada and Australia, and to some extent in the U.S with Foundations, Endowment Trusts etc.

⁵ See *Collapse Magazine*, Issue 1 1995, Vancouver, *Conflicting Visions of Utopia in the Post War Period* by Angela Vanhaelen.

⁶ This does not refer to the intention of the artists, which may and often did run counter to this, but to the corporate and institutional contexts which coded the work.

⁷ See Raymond Williams' 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'.