

AN ENPAP SYMPOSIUM PRIMER

THE – NEW – PUBLIC – ART – PRODUCERS

CLAIRE – DOHERTY

Where the story begins

I had just reached the end of a rather breathless monologue to a group of curating students who were doing their best to stave off the effects of the night before. We'd pelted through contemporary art biennials, off-site gallery programmes and regeneration schemes, pushed past notions of public space and publicness with hardly a nod to Arendt or de Certeau, clambered over the remains of Relational Aesthetics and emerged blinking into the bright lights of social media.

"Any questions?" I asked.

A tentative hand was raised. "Err... why are you credited as a producer on that film? Have you sold out? Isn't it important to retain your integrity as a curator?"

There it was.

Of all the questions to be asked about the complexities of working with artists in the public realm, the most pressing concern appeared to be existential. I curate, therefore I am. The question, and the subsequent heated debate which ensued, turned on a misconception, prevalent in the visual arts, that whilst 'producing' is driven by logistics, 'curating' is the preserve of the imagination and the intellect. I don't believe this is just semantics. It defines the schism between the performing arts and the visual arts when it comes to the public realm.

For the performing arts, the producer is an 'alchemist of the impossible'.¹ Kate Tyndall, in her

celebration of thirteen (primarily performing) arts producers in 2006, described the producer as the protagonist in a project's conception and destiny. "The producer," she suggests, "leads in navigating between a bold vision of an idea, and how feasibly – and brilliantly – to deliver it, how to give the idea life and locate it in the world." The producer must possess vision, tenacity, courage and intelligence: traits to which those curating students would no doubt aspire and yet, as Creative Time President and Artistic Director, Anne Pasternak, has recalled, the mere mention of public art to those working in arts organisations is often "met with grimaces".²

In the collective imagination, public art is cast either as the controversial, uninvited guest or the mass entertainer. Characterised by monumental scale or mass appeal, the successful public artwork is judged against its ability to galvanise popular opinion and contribute positively to place-making. Invariably if it fails on either count, it is judged against its price tag. Even relatively well-informed art critics mistrust the genre. British journalist Jonathan Jones has decried public art as "a production line for boring art, and mavericks have no place in its dreary ethic."³

And yet this myopic view of art in the public realm masks its recent transformation beyond the gigantism of landmark sculpture, the mass appeal of participatory performance or the embedded nature of environmental design. Over the past two decades we've seen the diversification of approaches to

commissioning art in the public realm. Artists have always worked beyond the boundaries of institutional frameworks, of course, but what has changed is that such approaches are now actively sought out by commissioners and curators. Most notable changes include the commissioning of artists from the contemporary gallery sector employing media, materials and processes previously thought unsuitable for the public realm, the incorporation of dynamic curatorial methods and the exchange of single-sited, permanent outcomes in favour of dispersed interventions or cumulative, curated programmes which evolve over space and time. As a result we've seen the emergence of a new type of public art producer who wields logistical, creative and intellectual ingenuity.

Public art should now be understood as a variety of forms and approaches that engage with the sites and situations of the public realm. These range from embedded scenarios where artists operate from within planning departments; process-based projects, where the artworks constitute collective, participatory processes; fleeting sculptural or performative interventions and long-term durational model institutions.

But despite the vibrancy of art in the public realm, the role of producer still persists to be characterised as a 'service provider', to be under-resourced and misunderstood and is rarely promoted to emerging artists, curators or creative entrepreneurs as a viable career choice.

ENPAP

A network of curator producers from six organisations across Europe came together in 2010 to undertake a comparative study to discover common practices and to explore the distinct challenges of their individual contexts, in order that we might begin to articulate the vibrancy and importance of this role to public art.

What evolved over the two years of the study was a mutually supportive network, which may or may not develop into an internationally dispersed network of professionals and organisations. But perhaps of most interest to our peer network of artists, curators, funders and stakeholders was the emergence of a language to distinguish a visual arts curatorial approach to art in the public realm from gallery-based curating, public art consultancy and outdoor art event management.

As a primer for the symposium **Going Public –Telling it as it is?** and associated professional network meeting in Bilbao from 22nd to 24th March 2012, this text attempts to set out some of the terms of that new language. It does so in full recognition that the curatorial practices of each producer are distinct, that each has a set of professional and organizational ancestors stretching back decades and that our working methods are precarious, still in formation. The brief synopses below will be developed into a broader, more expansive text which will form part of a major new publication on producers of public art published by Situations in autumn 2012.

Place

There is a noticeable absence of pyrotechnics in our work, but neither are we interested in quiet beautification for its own sake. We are uncomfortable with the term 'event', partly because it brings to mind Guy Debord's characterization of spectacle as, "that in which shared experience is atomised, consumption is passive and without agency, foreclosing critical distance and creating a false togetherness."⁴ But to homogenise the diversity of our projects simply as anti-spectacles would be to do a disservice to those projects, which genuinely do gather a temporary community around a visually remarkable structure or event. Rather, perhaps we might characterise the difference between our work and those who specialise in outdoor arts events as committed to a critical agitation of place. A well-known events company in the UK describe their modus operandi as,

"...to go into a location, work with partners to create something spectacular, *leaving the place exactly as we found it*, and the people with a fantastic memory in their heads." [my emphases]

It is this notion of compliance, of place affirmation, from which we might distinguish ourselves, respecting that our curatorial approach to producing is not necessarily of more value – just simply that it requires different artists, a different set of skills and engenders a different outcome. Instead, our projects could be described as agitations, dislocations and interventions, which remake our sense of place. Some of course may be overtly confrontational, others quietly shift the ground under our feet, but each one is dedicated to a process of seeing anew, of raising questions about the world in which we live.

As producers and commissioners this places us in a particularly difficult position when it comes to funders and stakeholders. It appears, at least at first glance, that our artists seek to produce works that are place-contesting rather than place-making. Our projects are more likely to encourage audiences to get lost, rather than act as way-finders; are more likely to contest rather than assert 'publicness'. Whilst it is unlikely that any arts producer is free to work entirely outside the constraints of institutional responsibilities (whether due to the specifics of funding imperatives or programming demands), we feel particularly bound by such obligations. The sources of funding for art in the public realm tend to be broader than central government cultural programmes, incorporating planning, health, education and housing initiatives. The timing of projects is closely tied to a locality, rather than the autonomous rhythm of a curated, building-based programme – whether as part of a festival event, regeneration development, or initiated outside such cultural

frameworks. Hence, producing work in the public realm necessitates a negotiation of a range of expectations, which do not always sit easily with the idea of being 'shaken up'.

Success in developing and producing the work of critical artists within this context is determined by the producer's ability to find a common language for developing and promoting the work as a contribution to a progressive notion of place. The words 'persuasion', 'listening' and, even, 'smuggling' arose in our discussions to describe our methods of negotiation. From experience, this seemed to be more easily achieved in urban, metropolitan centres rather than in small towns or rural contexts, due to a city's willingness to be perceived as 'cutting edge' (though not exclusively). But whilst a city might readily embrace a fleeting intervention, the challenge of producing permanent public art programmes persists in every context – whether urban or rural.

Time

As the recession hit each one of the network's organisations across Europe, we witnessed a return to 'permanent legacy' as one of the primary expectations of public art. And yet, as Anne Pasternak suggests, permanent artworks "have to comply with standards imposed by engineers and safety inspectors, and must not offend public decency... All too often members of the judging panel lack expertise and vision, and when a selection is made and presented to the local community, it is most often brutally dissected,"⁵ – precisely because it will be on permanent display.

In our curatorial approach to the public realm, we advocate for a fundamental shift in thinking about the 'time', rather than simply the 'space', of public art. In the wake of critical responses to the fast and loose itinerancy of biennial curating, we've begun to test out new methods of thinking about long-term, durational programmes which develop over time – perhaps through a series of commissions or residencies, or through a project which unfolds and evolves in a particular locality. In many cases, these durational programmes require long-term commitment and charismatic agency to sustain them – distinguishing our working methods therefore from the consultant moving from one contract to the next. These curated programmes can be seen as the nearest public

art equivalent to the ways in which gallery or museum-based programmes have built constituencies in specific localities over time.

We need to shake up the specification of life-time in public art commissioning. Why does the viability of a public artwork lie in its capacity to endure physically? Why should the legacy of a temporary public artwork not be as keenly felt culturally as a permanently sited commemorative statue or integrated design within the built environment? We need to recognise that places are not static sites onto which public art is grafted; rather, regeneration is a continuous process to which artists are contributing. If public art can be seen as a continuous process, perhaps this can begin to help to challenge the emphasis on permanence.⁶

We also recognise the need to persuade funders, stakeholders and clients to appreciate how artists need time to get beneath the skin of a place and why investing in research visits and residencies will reap benefits later on; how a public artwork comes to fruition over time, just as it does in the studio, through false starts, exchanges and dreaming; and that the preparation of the ground for an artwork to effectively engage with a locality requires considerable resources.

People

Along with finding a new vocabulary for how public art producers are working with place and time, we need to articulate how we conceive of and engage with audiences. Over the last decade, debates around social engagement in the visual arts have polarized between antagonism and collaboration. Shannon Jackson's 'Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics', provides one of the clearest definitions of the terms of recent debates:

"For those who measure a work's success on its degree of community 'self-definition', its efficacy is measured in its outreach strategies, its means for providing access, the representational demographics of its participants, and its identifiable social outcomes. Such critical barometers also worry about the mediating role of the artist, about whether an artistic vision enables or neutralizes community voices. But other critical frameworks question the concept of artist-as-community-helpmate on different terms; indeed, for some, a critical barometer starts by questioning the concept of community on which such work relies. To what does a term like community refer? Does it pursue or inform visions of harmony and consensus? Should a work seek to represent under-represented voices or provide a shared forum for all? Does the helpmate model obscure other goals of artistic work that might use the language of critique rather than the language of consensus?"⁷

For us, the entanglement between collaboration, co-production, artistic intervention, shared authorship, anticipated and unexpected encounters, discordant voices and collective decision-making defines the complex ways in which participation in art in the public realm occurs. As David Edgar suggests in his recent article, 'Why should we fund the arts?', "almost all the documented social benefits of the arts have been achieved not by people attending plays and concerts but by those who participate in them. And while many publicly funded arts

organisations have participatory programmes, most public money still goes to subsidise people sitting or standing silently looking at other people doing things (or, in the case of books and pictures, things they've done)...⁸ Hence if we are to argue for the value of producing art in the public realm which challenges place identity, resists mass participation and moves away from embellishment, we must find the language to communicate the nature of participation in art in the public realm before, during and after the event. Empowering our audiences to speak back as part of the work does not necessarily mean the surrender of artistic integrity or artistic authorship.

The impact of social media is transforming the ways in which we can conceive of this conversation as it occurs across public space. In his influential essay, 'Dispersion', Seth Price suggests, "we should recognize that collective experience is now based on simultaneous private experiences, distributed across the field of media culture, knit[ted] together by ongoing debate, publicity, promotion and discussion... Publicness today has as much to do with sites of production and reproduction as it does with any supposed physical commons, so a popular album could be regarded as a more successful instance of public art than a monument tucked away in an urban plaza."⁹

Social media is certainly characterising the new ways in which events are promoted and circulate, but it also offers the chance to expand critical conversations through a work. Mindful of Jacques Ranciere's warning that, "participation doesn't guarantee critical legitimacy", the new public art producers are embracing social media as a means of activating criticality. Because art in a public context is not always expected, or sought out, and infiltrates across multiple networks of journeys and imaginations, it also offers the opportunities for cumulative conversations which do not begin and end with the rise and fall of a curtain.

Organisation

Whilst the scale and operational methods of the six ENPAP organisations vary considerably, the comparative study revealed a single common feature – that each organisation was dedicated to being an effective agent of social and cultural change. Our diverse projects nourish, as a recent research study has suggested, "the capacity for creative illusion – that is, the ability to think and act 'as if' things were different."¹⁰ And if our organisations are to be effective, as producers we need to "maintain a position between embeddedness and critical distance" – acting as both insider and outsider. This clearly distinguishes the new public art

producer from a consultant, but also from the historical definition of a museum curator. The new public art producer seeks to effect interruptions, physical displacements and dislocations, to conjure mirages that enter the social imagination, to set in motion quiet infections which fundamentally remake place and space; and to proffer utopian futures. In the spirit of the traditional definition of a curator then, we do 'take care' of place, time and people, but, aligning ourselves with the dynamic performing arts producer, we also contest place, interrupt time, and galvanise people.

Claire Doherty is Director of Situations an art commissioning and research programme currently based at the University of the West of England, Bristol UK.

www.situations.org.uk

End notes

- 1 Kate Tyndall, *The Producers: Alchemists of the Impossible* (London: Jerwood Foundation, 2006).
- 2 Anne Pasternak, *Short-term solutions to a permanent problem: Temporary art enables artists to realise their dreams while activating public spaces*, The Art Newspaper, 20 October 2010.
- 3 Jonathan Jones, *The fate of Wallinger's horse shows why public art cannot be good art*, The Guardian, 5 July 2011.
- 4 See Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (Paris, 1967). Translated by Ken Knabb.
- 5 Pasternak, op.cit.
- 6 For a consideration of duration in commissioning contemporary art see Claire Doherty & Paul O'Neill introduction to *Locating the Producers*, available to download at <http://www.situations.org.uk/publications/locating-producers-durational-approaches-public-ar/>
- 7 See *Quality Time, Sharron Jackson, Social Works. Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (London: Routledge) 2011.
- 8 David Edgar, *Why should we fund the arts?* The Guardian, 5 January 2012.
- 9 Seth Price, *Dispersion*, access at <http://www.distributedhistory.com/Dispersion2008.pdf>.
- 10 Professor Lynn Froggett and her team at UCLAN recently published these emergent findings about the impact of socially engaged arts practice and the ways in which its value can be evaluated and articulated. Download the headline findings [here](#).

Going Public Telling It As It Is

A symposium about artistic practice and public space

22, 23 and 24 March 2012, in BizBAK UPV/EHU and ARTIUM, Basque Country, Spain.

The European Network of Public Art Producers (ENPAP) was formed in 2009 and unites six art organisations that share an affinity for expanding the notion of public art. The aims of the network are to raise criticality in public art commissioning practice through a mutually beneficial network. The network promotes knowledge exchange, developments in new working methods and establishes a common vocabulary for new forms of production and public engagement across contemporary art. www.e-n-p-a-p.net

The founder organisations of ENPAP are:

BAC-Baltic Art Center (Visby/Sweden)
www.balticartcenter.com

consonni (Bilbao/Spain)
www.consonni.org

Mossutställningar (Stockholm/Sweden)
www.mossutstallningar.com

Situations (Bristol/UK)
www.situations.org.uk

SKOR | Foundation for Art and Public Domain (Amsterdam/The Netherlands)
www.skor.nl

Vector Association (Iasi/Romania)
www.periferic.org



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