

Public Art: a private view

Neil Parkyn argues that Public Art should carry a burden of personal relevance, irreversible loss and perhaps a wider purpose

Not so very long ago a dear architect chum of mine, Tim Bushe (Walker Bushe Architects) spent a rather chilly afternoon on top of the otherwise vacant Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square at the time when the plinth was open to all comers with something to show and/or tell. Tim was enclosed in a glass drum generously vouchsafed by a contractor, from which he observed – and drew – the buildings around the Square. I have a copy of the result above me as I write. His purpose was to raise money for a favourite charity.

Living here in France I am now in the habit of 'deconstructing' situations, so Tim's exploit set me thinking on the theme of Public Art. Was Tim himself, briefly, Public Art? Was his Public Art norama of buildings likewise? Did the fact that he was clearly visible matter most? I must leave that pesky problem to local philosophes, but there is much to say, in all seriousness, on the subject of Public Art in our cities and in our lives. After all Public Art enters our field of vision without invitation, you may bump into it or graze your thigh on a constituent piece of exposed Cor-ten.

We can hardly claim Public Art as a novel apparition; the stuff has been with us for aeons, gracing a piazza in Umbria, pointing a rifle towards Flanders Fields, glaring down upon skateboarders, even itself being skateboardable. Statues in particular are especially vulnerable, not only to graffiti but equally to cruel cartoonists. Why is it always the fate of any self-respecting despot to be toppled or decapitated, in statue form at least, by the freedom fighters? If matters become over-laical, then off come those saintly heads on the tympanum. Sorry, holy chaps! Or, reeling back (or is it forward..?)

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what are the apes clustered around Stanley Kubrick's mysterious monolith in '2001 – A Space Odyssey' making of this giant artwork? Would they have awarded the artist an Arts Council grant? (Grunt your answer).

Prying a little further one can readily identify the primary categories of Public Art. It's a useful and timely exercise, leading in a reassuring French way to a set of shiny new pigeonholes. We can name them: 'costume jewellery', 'puzzle-in-the-park', 'stage set' a 'arty installation' and finally 'loony literal'. Worth taking a closer look, as follows:

Costume jewellery

This is one for the devout historians of British Modernism. A far cry from Dr Goebbel's famous dismissal of applied sculpture as 'lipstick on a gorilla', it encompasses all those worthy and well intentioned confections of metal and sometimes ceramics applied to the otherwise blank flank of a building. Look no further than Oxford Street's John Lewis or the TUC Building just off Tottenham Court Road. Can't leave a Blank Flank alone, it seems. All too often this condition stems from the basic banality and urban bad manners of the 'architecture' itself. A flurry of twisted metal won't bring it back to life, but it's a good try. (See also Giant Logos)

Puzzle-in-the-park

Meaning a free-standing sculpture in an arcadian setting or city square. In its purest form it is encountered across a well mown lawn surrounding a stately home or a proud Polytechnic. Shades of Angus Wilson's New Town novel 'Late Call', a personal favourite. We are talking the seasoned bronzes of a Hepworth or a Moore. I can just see the new, nervous Vice Chancellor stubbing out a quiet fag on one of them. Or the memorable, secret afternoon when we played scratch cricket in our architect professor's garden, using a conveniently sized Paolozzi as the wicket!

Stage set

These are not conventional, long stay artworks,



but ephemeral displays that tease the punters – a room full of steam, hence zero visibility, black boxes with myriad sound sources, even an exhibition pavilion made from discarded coffee cups and recycled till rolls. Nothing to hang around for, but reassuring to learn that each pavilion, when recycled, generates over 12KWh of clean electricity.

Arty installation

These include a set of objects centred on a theme. For 'Migration' we substitute, artfully – what else? – piles of old suitcases (don't forget the steamer labels). Or a giant paperclip to symbolise the Tyranny of the Office....and so on.

Loony literal

Sadly, this is all too often the case, taking a Public Art brief at face value. One salient example provides a salutary warning. A leading landscape architecture practice was commissioned by a client who was Mr Big in Newfoundland. He required a beaver-themed public fountain, an interesting design challenge which was successfully completed on site. BUT the imagery was all wrong. Locals complained that real beavers certainly didn't beaver around, as per legend. They were in actual fact lazy and skittish. The fountain was never altered, but the nicknames flourished....

So much for the stand-alone items. While



they made excellent sense as celebratory beacons – a Great Victory, a Radical Reformer here or a Neglected Group there, they are so often frozen in time, their List of Subscribers becoming illegible with passing traffic. More relevant are those pieces which the Public has somehow taken to heart, appropriated and worked into their daily lives. One thinks of the Great Clock in Grand Central Station NYC, the front steps of Tate Britain or the Steam Clock in Vancouver. All these are functioning objects, meeting places, personal landmarks, therefore taken to heart. No matter how small – and one thinks of the dog 'Greyfriars Bobby' in Edinburgh – they effortlessly acquire value and purpose. Few people would think of meeting next to a politician's statue in parliament Square.

This would suggest that the most 'successful' breed of Public Art is one which has some functional purpose, humble or noble. We value, regardless of personal taste or prevailing fashion, Lutyens' Cenotaph in Whitehall, a masterpiece of abstract form that can mean all things to all men and take upon itself the burden of national remembrance. Or Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans' Memorial in Washington DC. Won in competition when Lin was a 21 year old architecture student, it has become a national focus and place of sanity for so many. The concept is refreshing simple...

a slope slowly descending into the earth, lined by a wall presenting the names of the fallen in the order of their deaths. You can touch the wall, be selfied at the appropriate spot, linger, weep or pass by in silence... the very opposite of bombast and brass bands.

At this level we are talking of Public Art being able to carry a burden of personal relevance, irreversible loss and, perhaps, a wider purpose. This can seldom be achieved by the often self indulgent and selfish constructions of the lone artist brought in to liven up the architecture. Perhaps that's why so much of, say, 1960s British Public Art seems today a quaint curiosity, to be studied at leisure in the parks of Stevenage or the Concrete Cows of Milton Keynes. Enduring Public Art doesn't need a nickname for taxi drivers. It is actually a very private affair. ■

PHOTOS clockwise from top:
 Prospectors hard at work, Brisbane
 Art at Work: footbridge counterweights in Bristol Harboursid
 Battery Park, New York
 Temporary(floral) art, South of France
 Spelling it out for the postman

