



What's That Thing? A Report on Public Art

Igor Toronyi-Lalic

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1

Introduction

In the former mining town of St Helens, a £2 million 66-foot baby's head bulges out of the ground. On the approach to the new town of Cumbernauld, a 33-foot busty silver mermaid gestures at passers-by like a Vegas barmaid. Half a million pounds' worth of hand-crocheting will soon grace the streets of Nottingham. Another half a million will go into felling a stretch of Highland forest for a football pitch installation. In Northumberland, £2 million of landscaping will see a 400-foot naked 'green goddess' (to be called 'Northumberlandia') emerge from a rubbish dump.

The past two decades have seen an unprecedented boom in public art. More unsolicited installations and sculptures rose up in the 1990s and 2000s than in the entire century before. A further 180 public art commissions have been put out to tender in the past two years. Successive governments, Conservative and Labour, have encouraged the spread into schools and hospitals, housing estates and municipal squares, parks and villages, redeveloped quaysides and decommissioned pits.

This year 'statuemanía' will scale new heights. There is the Olympic Park's £19.1 million Anish Kapoor and the Arts Council's £6 million Cultural Olympiad, which will fund twelve landmark sculptures – one each for Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the nine regions of England. This all comes on top of the Arts Council's bread-and-butter grants, which include millions for one-off schemes and further millions for regularly funded public art consultancies and commissioning agencies. So-called 'per cent for art' schemes will ensure that private developers contribute millions to public art, too. The coming year will see installations appear in Poole, Barry, Saltaire, Hackney, Blackpool, Cambridge, Stoke-on-Trent, Brighton, Longford, Gretna Green and John O'Groats (to name but a few). According to the state-funded public art advocacy body *ixia*, the public art industry was last year worth at least £56 million.¹

Some have labelled this a 'renaissance'. No one can deny the successes. Antony Gormley's *Angel of the North*, Richard Wilson's *Turning the Place Over*

and Richard Serra's *Fulcrum* are bold triumphs. But for every memorable work of imagination, there are ten more that beg to be ignored and forgotten. London is 'awash with bad public art', wrote the *Daily Telegraph's* chief art critic, Richard Dorment, in 2011.² The *Burlington Magazine's* November 2011 editorial talked of 'the constant fear of coming across a newly sited public sculpture'.³ 'Public art is ... a load of ugly, pompous, pretentious and narcissistic rubbish dumped on a snoozing public by arrogant bureaucrats and sponsors', wrote Jonathan Jones, art critic of the *Guardian*.⁴


The public has been even less kind: an online *Guardian* poll on the subject of the ArcelorMittal Tower saw 60 per cent vote for the work being 'garbage';⁵ meanwhile installations are regularly targets of vandalism and abuse. Some of the most vociferous opponents are insiders. Art colleges, keen to maintain their prestige, shun the whole thing: mention public art to young students at the Royal College and the common response is a shudder.

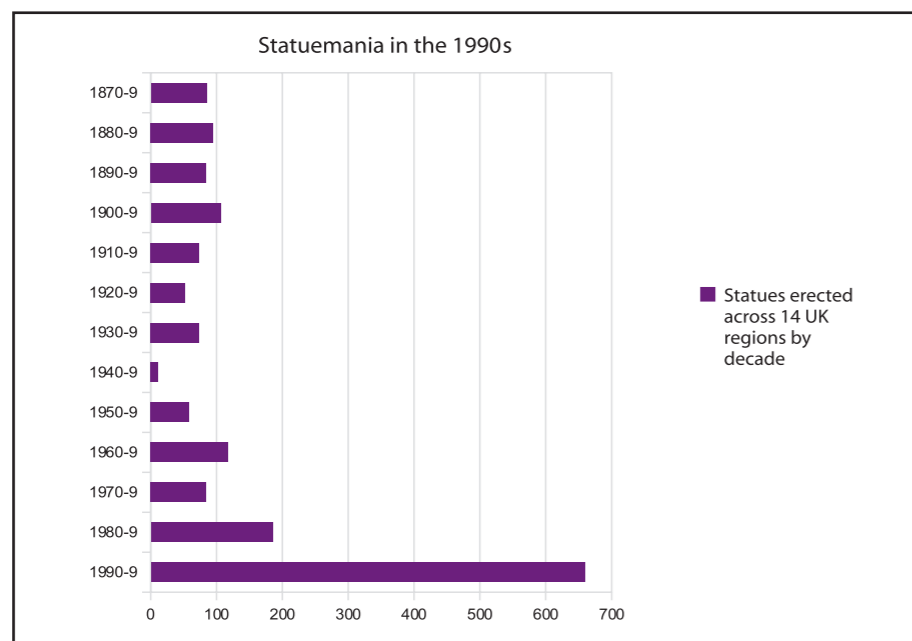
And you can understand why. The past twenty years have seen public art become a public service. Today's public sculpture must foster 'community cohesion', bring in investment, boost property prices, fight crime or ease traffic. The public art strategy in Hastings proclaimed that it would be able to 'reduce death rates from circulatory disease (coronary heart disease and stroke) and cancer in people under 75'.⁶

Public art has come to be seen as a cure for society's ills, which has meant that it has increasingly been co-opted by various arms of government. This might be justified, were any of the claims correct: if public art really were a panacea, who would carp at the government using it to improve our lives? But in fact the myriad claims made on behalf of public art are, statistically and conceptually, without foundation.

Yet these claims have been elevated over the one objective that can be controlled and that does matter: quality. Public art will achieve nothing if it is

not good. Yet everything about the process by which public art is commissioned in the country today militates against the commissioning of good artists and the creation of good art.

Contrary to the hopes of the Arts Council and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, two decades of investment in (and advocacy on behalf of) public art have made our built environment less attractive, not more. It has infuriated the public. It has alienated the arts world. It has estranged communities from their neighbourhoods and driven a further wedge of mistrust between politicians and the public. And the artistic result has been a mountain of mediocrity. 



Source: Marc Sidwell (2009) *The Arts Council: Managed to death*. London: Social Affairs Unit/New Culture Forum.

2

Public Art: Are You Being Served?

A public service?

One constituency that might be expected to have a healthy relationship with public art is the *public*. But no, far from it: much public art of the past twenty years has little (if anything) to do with the audience it purports to be addressing and with which it presumptuously associates itself. As Josie Appleton writes:

[T]oday's public art is not really the expression of community values or desires: it's driven by officialdom, and its spirit springs from the policy specifications of bureaucrats. Such art is about officialdom's *image* of the public, not real communities of living, working men and women.⁷

When the people are asked what they think about the public art in their area, silence is often the response. In the early 1990s, a survey of the inhabitants of London's Broadgate which sought to measure local response to the public art (some of the finest in Britain) that had been commissioned for the new complex drew a blank. Not a single resident surveyed mentioned the art as a reason for deciding to live there. When the question was framed even more broadly – what did they like or dislike about the area – again no one brought up the public art. Instead they referred to water features, terraces, seating, leisure activities, shops and greenery. Only in their dislikes did one resident specifically mention Richard Serra's Fulcrum sculpture.⁸

The only other time the art was mentioned came in the form of back-handed compliments. One woman said that the Botero sculpture of a voluptuous reclining female was liked because 'it makes everyone sitting nearby feel slim'. While another resident noted that the Richard Serra was being used as 'a late night urinal'.⁹ Most public surveys on public art are either negative or, at best, equivocal in their findings.¹⁰

The potential embarrassment to councils of dis-

covering that the millions of pounds spent on public art might not even have been noticed by the public prevents many from risking any sort of evaluative survey. If they do, they usually avoid any questions that might uncover anything of interest. In a recent Cambridge City Council review of local public art, respondents were asked whether they had 'noticed' the public art. They were asked 'where they had seen' it. They were asked what the public art should 'say to them'. They were even asked where the art should be located. What they were conspicuously not asked was whether they thought any of the public art was any good.¹¹

Anecdotal evidence of the public's feelings towards its art is overwhelmingly negative. Public art schemes have, over the past twenty years, frequently been accompanied by protest, petitions and public abuse. Fife Council's attempt to inflict a third unwanted piece of public art on the run-down former mining town of Lochgelly has been met with vocal resistance.¹² In Ashford, a £500,000 series of public artworks – one of which became a driving hazard – saw local groups up in arms. In Glenrothes, the reported local pride in this new town's wealth of public artworks was little in evidence on the ground.¹³

Nicknames are instructive. Public art often acquires pet names from locals – and they are rarely flattering. Dhruva Mistry's River, Youth, Guardians and Object (Variations) (Birmingham) was dubbed 'The Floozy in the Jacuzzi'; Nicholas Pope's Five Amorphous Shapes (Bristol) became 'The Elephant Droppings'; Raymond Mason's Forward (Birmingham) was named the 'Lurpak sculpture'; Paul Day's The Meeting Place (St Pancras International Station) was christened the 'St Pancras Bomber'; Thomas Heatherwick's troubled B of the Bang (Manchester), which began to fall apart, became known as 'Kerplunk'; and Maggi Hambling's The Brixton Heron (Brixton) rejoices under the nickname 'The Bird on the Turd'.

The lack of evidence of public appreciation often has councils clutching at straws. That a piece

of public art has not been vandalised, for example, has increasingly been accepted as a valid indication of positive acceptance. When the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) asked Southwark Council what evidence it had to prove that the public was grateful for the art that was being commissioned in its name, the council proudly pointed out that the artworks in a recent regenerative public art programme in Peckham 'were left untouched by graffiti for the duration of the building programme (over three years in some cases)'.¹⁴

Much of the public art industry is unsure what exactly it is meant to do with the public. In the past, local authorities ignored it or tried to fob it off with educational projects. Today they are increasingly sensitive to the need to bring the public more fully into the process. But still rarely (if ever) do public art schemes come direct from the public. The usual routine is to dictate a process of engagement from on high: corralling the local residents into public consultation groups or shepherding them into politically correct community projects.

In December 2011, I visited one public consultation between the people of John O'Groats and the public artists Dalziel + Scullion over the proposal for a new piece for the town. The problem here was that the local people were being sold the idea that a piece of public art would mark a reversal of their economic woes. The result was a soulless and jargon-packed PowerPoint presentation on how these artists could re-brand the town. It had nothing to do with art or the public at all.

Very often public art fails precisely because commissioners have attempted cravenly to follow the imagined wishes of the public. This second-guessing has led to such horrors as Mohammed Al-Fayed's Michael Jackson statue at Craven Cottage. The perceived lack of public enthusiasm for contemporary art has led developers to believe that the opposite – a kind of tacky, figurative art – must be the favoured style of the people.

Equally wrong-headed is the idea that if some



members of the public engage in the creation of an artwork, it will appeal to the rest of the public. Community art is, however, an even less effective way of making public art more attractive to the general public. However much it may make the specific group of people engaging in the creative process happy, the artistic consequences – by definition amateurish – are unlikely to satisfy anyone else. In fact, community schemes like the Millennium mosaics in London's Green Street or the Whale's Tooth (see photo above) in the Blackness area of Dundee are often the most forlorn, dispiriting things imaginable.

Those schemes in which the public has been ignored are frequently defended on the grounds that artists have some magical connection to the feelings and thoughts of the people – sometimes because the artists are local, other times because they are outsiders. Of course, this claim always seems slightly rum coming from a public artist who has accepted a commission from the state. Sometimes artists are given the licence to simply magic a public up.¹⁵

There are many ways in which the public could

and should be involved in public art. The most obvious way is in instigating the artwork itself. This used to be the norm: the whole business of public art in the nineteenth century was a grassroots affair. Memorials, statues and even fountains would only be erected if the local residents wanted them. The largest wave of memorial commissioning – to remember the fallen of the First World War – was entirely organic: committees were formed, public meetings were convened, tenders were advertised in local shops and money was pooled through subscription.

Today this is unheard of. The publicly funded body *ixia*, which is charged with advocating for and collating evidence about public art, could not name a single major commission that had been instigated by the public. Even community art is rarely proposed without a steering hand from the various education and development departments in local authorities. Today, the only time the public might club together in the cause of public art is to campaign against it. No wonder artists now often feel the need to invent their public.

Today's public art is the opposite of a public service. It disenfranchises threefold the people who – by and large – pay for it: money is taken from them without their consent; art is commissioned without their consent; and the pieces are then installed in the public realm without their consent. It is a form of taxation without representation – which is why vandalism might (arguably) be regarded as a form of public protest. Certainly for many, public art must be robust enough to withstand whatever the public chooses to throw at it. In a 1972 essay, 'The Public Sculpture Problem', Lawrence Alloway suggests that the artist is responsible for the graffiti and damage that their works might trigger off in passers-by. He offers 'Alloway's Law' on the relationship between public art and vandalism:

1. If a work can be reached it will be defaced. 2. If the subsequent changes reduce the level of

information of the work, it was not a public art work to start with ... A public sculpture should be invulnerable or inaccessible. It should have the material strength to resist attack or be easily cleanable, but it also needs a formal structure that is not wrecked by alterations ... Public works of art can be classified as successes only if they incorporate or resist unsolicited additions and subtractions.¹⁶

Besides this, vandalism is not always mindless. We surely cannot so swiftly dismiss the repeated attacks on Maggi Hambling's *Scallop* (Aldeburgh), which was daubed with the words 'Move this tin can'. Nor can we ignore the assaults on Raymond Mason's *Forward* – one of the installation's heads was sawn off and local children started to use the group of figures as an adventure playground. In both cases, the critics agreed with the vandals. And, in the case of *Forward*, so did the council, for the piece was eventually removed.

It is an odious position to be in – for artist and art alike – if all public art is constantly subject to public scrutiny. The same demands are not made of other subsidised art forms. But the acceptance by many that it must be placed under this sort of scrutiny is a consequence of its ubiquity, of the fact that it represents a triple public disenfranchisement, and of a sneaking suspicion that very few people actually like it. Public art would be able to breathe far more easily if it took at least some steps to rein in its reliance on subsidy and took root in the communities it was meant to be for.

An artistic service?

It is not just the public that feels alienated from public art. Gallerists, curators, critics and artists are just as averse to much of what is being commissioned in the public realm and in the public name. Mainstream contemporary art – the commercial gallery system and most aspiring young artists – will have nothing to do with public art practice, and

none of the best schools actively promote or teach it.¹⁷

According to *Guardian* art critic Jonathan Jones:

The trouble with public art is that it requires a set of skills in an artist that are precisely the opposite of the qualities that attend true talent ... The public artist must be able to negotiate with businesses, councils and arts bodies, to explain an idea and to supervise it through complex practical processes. Big art needs big planning. Public art has to be precisely costed and 'sold' to potential funders. It also has to be sold to a variety of local interest groups who may object to it. So the public sculptor of today needs to be manager, accountant, politician and PR expert. Is that anyone's idea of a born artist?¹⁸

Few serious artists are happy to plough through the bureaucratic requirements of today's commissions, and few will be much inspired by the suffocating specifics of most briefs. One regeneration scheme for a colliery at Markham Vale demanded the following illiterate clutch of ideas: 'Ambition, Involved, Integrated, Prestige, Transformative'. This commission also (interestingly) required the artist to take on recruits with the aim of increasing 'the capacity of Derbyshire artists to take on major public art commissions'.

Public artists beget public artists; public art – public art. Public art is a closed world, politically hemmed in and artistically ostracised. Artists who have chosen to enter the public art arena are rarely welcomed back into the gallery system. The skills that they are forced to adopt are not transferable. The ideas that they are asked to explore are rarely useful to contemporary practices. Quite the opposite: these box-ticking talents are widely considered to be corrosive to true individualistic artistic feeling.

Bureaucracy, however, is not the only thing that undermines artistic integrity. Councils' democratic

responsibilities can curb the artistic potentials of public art schemes. A path of utility is often chosen instead:

Town centres are offered decorative advertising stands, derivative fountains or decorative railings to prevent cyclists abusing footpaths ... [Art projects] compensate for their intellectual agendas by serving another simultaneous function. In a way this offers a position of retreat for the commissioner to a less contentious endeavour ... Decorative benches, ornamental lamp-standards and the odd up-lit building can be explained away by the argument 'we had to replace the (insert street furniture here) anyway and this involved local schools'.¹⁹

For many artists, the very act of collaborating with the state condemns them to artistic servility. As the American painter John Sloan once said, 'Sure, it would be fine to have a Ministry of the Fine Arts ... Then we'd know where the enemy is.'²⁰ Public art is still overwhelmingly concerned with a positive manipulation of reality to the advantage of those in charge. Private developers want the artist to add economic value to their land. Local authorities want the artist to transform and inspire. Optimism is always demanded. The result is countless doves, families or children gazing brightly upwards, much of it but a small step from socialist realism.

It is no surprise, then, that critics have poured scorn on the genre, and that artists have sought to distance themselves from the more slavish norm of public art practice. Antony Gormley has called public art 'crap'²¹ and dismissed the idea that he might do 'roundabout art'.²² Sculptor Richard Deacon proclaimed that he is wary of handing himself over to the community: the results, he says, can be both 'trite and demeaning'.²³ Some within the public art advocacy industry have even started to use a different name – 'art in the public realm' – to dissociate their output from other ordinary public art.

But the only real way for public art to regain its integrity would be to return to its roots. The traditions that have most nourished public art practice are land art, site-specific art, relational art and street art. What distinguishes this art from public art is autonomy and integrity. Most of the best artists working in these traditions have undertaken their activities with a fanatical sense of independence. Only when public art throws off its political, economic and social duties and returns to this kind of artistic freedom will it ever again be taken seriously.

An economic service?

Public art has become the poster boy of economic regeneration. There have been claims that it can 'increase land values and the sale or letting price of a development';²⁴ that it can 'attract companies and investment'; that it is, in fact, 'vital to the economic recovery of many cities'.²⁵ And this is why local authorities and regeneration agencies have pushed developers to incorporate public art into their plans.

Yet there is no hard evidence for any of it: 'Currently no benchmarks are available to developers ... to enable them to evaluate the benefits of public art schemes, to clearly understand the role that art may play in future schemes, or to advocate for the inclusion of art.'²⁶ Early reports – such as the *Evaluation of Public Art Projects Funded under the Lottery* – provided no statistical analysis, but only subjective statements – e.g. one scheme 'helped to give a cultural dimension to economic concepts of regionalism'.²⁷

Since then, millions of pounds more have been pumped into vast sculpture trails and public art schemes. The need to find evidence of economic efficacy to justify the spending has become ever more pressing. One 100-page report by the Policy Research Institute (PRI) on the £4.5 million Welcome to the North series of sculptures at least attempted to create a framework for a proper analysis. But rather than draw conclusions on the basis of the available

evidence, the authors attempted to find evidence to support a series of preordained 'outcomes', including 'rising land and commercial floor space values', 'private sector investment', 'attraction of new skills and businesses' and 'rising house prices'.²⁸

When these key medium-term economic hopes did not materialise, they waved the evidence away: '[In] the current phase of flatline economic growth it is more difficult to attribute wider changes in say, house prices, visitor numbers or crime levels to the presence or otherwise of public art.'²⁹ But the flatlining of economic growth did not make it more difficult to attribute wider changes: it made it hard to attribute *positive* changes to house prices, etc. One could quite easily identify *negative* changes, but then that would not have made happy reading for those who commissioned the document – the same people who had commissioned the art. Here we see a perfect example of the blurring of advocacy and research that is so common in public art.³⁰

In this, researchers have taken their lead from the top. Former Culture Secretary Chris Smith used to encourage selective analysis. In 2003, he exhorted an audience of cultural administrators to 'use the measurements and figures and labels that you can, when you need to, in order to convince the rest of the governmental system of the value and importance of what you're seeking to do'.³¹

This is necessary only because the evidence for what Smith and the public art industry advocate is, at best, mixed (and, at worst, contradictory). A University of Westminster report, *Public Art in Private Places*, found that art was 'fifth out of six factors influencing the choice of buildings' for relocating companies: 'there was a weak link between an occupier's decision to take a tenancy in an office development and the presence of public art'.³² Even those behind Welcome to the North were forced to admit that developers did not see an economic benefit to public art: 'the proximity of public art was not felt by developers to impact on "bottom line" sales values upon the completion of a residential

site which were far more likely to be influenced by the state quality of the build and property market conditions'.³³

Another part of the economic case for public art is that it draws in tourists. Certainly some public art gains such international renown that it does become an attraction in its own right. The Angel of the North has, for instance. But its success is almost unique and is virtually impossible to replicate. The Angel of the North was the first high-profile British act of gigantism in the mould of the Eiffel Tower. The subsequent debates for and against its erection helped it gain totemic status. It came to stand as a symbol – not just for modern public art, but also for a hopeful new political landscape that was meant to have been ushered in by New Labour. It is impossible to replicate the forces that came together to create this phenomenon.

Many developers have 'bought' these economic claims and have turned to public art in the hope of bolstering their profits. The outcomes have rarely been positive. One of the worst examples is Paul Day's critically panned St Pancras bronze, The Meeting Place, which was commissioned for explicitly commercial reasons. Or there is Lucien Simon's Boab I, commissioned by developers CIT Markborough in 1999 'to catch the public's eye and make them aware of the new [Bermondsey] development'.³⁴ Within a year it had been dismantled. Pursuing economic gain in public art has rarely paid off.

A social service?

The belief that public art can improve society has a long history. In 1835, appearing before a parliamentary select committee that analysed the impact of the government's programme of arts education, 'numerous expert witnesses testified that art could be depended on to improve the morals and deportment of the lower orders'.³⁵ The past twenty years have seen a broader version of this idea gather political momentum and academic weight. In an increasing number of essays and

policy papers, public art has been linked to improvements in social cohesion, social stability and a renewal of civil society. Politicians and local councils have trumpeted the ability of public art to foster a community identity, eliminate anti-social behaviour, improve education and even lower crime.³⁶

Tower Hamlets Council's planning obligations document asserts that: 'Public art aids regeneration schemes by developing a positive identity for an area and improving its image ... [which] will encourage people to value their surroundings, reduce vandalism in the area and create a healthier, safer and more sustainable environment.'³⁷ Cambridge City Council's Public Art Supplementary Planning Document suggests that the roles of public art should include 'helping people to reflect on the nature of where they live or work or socialise', 'improving community safety in the public realm', 'contributing to community building and social cohesion', 'empowering and involving the community in decision making' and 'promoting social engagement' and 'relaxation'.³⁸

How any of these laudable aims might be achieved – and whether public art is best placed to achieve any of them – is anyone's guess. Few evaluative studies can be relied upon to give an objective account. The PRI analysis of the Welcome to the North public art scheme takes the same approach to the social evidence as it did to the economic. A 2008 survey investigating whether people who lived nearby the various Welcome to the North sculptures felt that their neighbourhood had 'improved/declined/stayed the same over the past three years' found that a substantial majority thought it had stayed the same or declined. Yet the Centre for Urban Development and Environmental Management (CUDEM) bundled the neutral responses in with the positive ones and mendaciously suggested that a generally positive outcome could be gleaned.

Unbiased analysis has been less kind to the

case of public art. One government-commissioned report from an independent cultural consultant concluded that 'it remains a fact that relative to the volume of arts activity taking place in the county's poorest neighbourhoods, the evidence of the contribution it makes to neighbourhood renewal is paltry'.³⁹ Hastings Council's claims that public art would 'take our five most deprived wards out of the worst 10% nationally'⁴⁰ unsurprisingly shows no hope of coming true. In fact, the number of deprived wards in Hastings that fall into the bottom 10 per cent has increased.⁴¹

Public art has accompanied great social transformations in Glasgow, Liverpool and the North East. But it remains far from clear that the art was as crucial a piece of the transformative jigsaw as the billions of pounds invested in new homes and amenities. To prove this, one would have to find an example of a deprived town being transformed through the siting of a piece of public art alone. And while there are plenty of instances where this has been attempted, there are none where it has succeeded.

Victor Pasmore's Apollo Pavilion in Peterlee and the rich thicket of Henry Moores and Barbara Hepworths in Harlow are two attempts. Neither the Pasmore nor the Moores and Hepworths can be gainsaid as works of arts. They can, however, be derided as weapons in the fight against poverty and for community cohesion. The Apollo Pavilion did not become 'a temple to raise the quality of a housing estate to the level of the Gods' (as Pasmore had hoped),⁴² and the Harlow sculptures did nothing to combat poverty. Neither project should ever have had such hopeless tasks foisted on it.

But however hopelessly idealistic the Peterlee and Harlow acts of 1960s cultural munificence, they at least provided candy for the eye. Today, local authorities and regeneration agencies increasingly ignore aesthetics in favour of manipulating public art projects to seek their social efficacy. The most common route is to prescribe a community

dimension. This is rarely to the artistic benefit of the final piece (or to the long-term social benefit of the community).

There is a more fundamental problem with public art schemes that aim for social *and* economic benefits. Where regeneration takes hold, higher land values result. Higher land values lead to higher property prices; this leads to gentrification and at least a partial dispersal of the original community. Therefore much of the public art that aims for a regenerative impact is (as was discovered in parts of Newcastle) increasing social polarisation.⁴³

Even the seemingly benign, patrician-like desire behind some public art schemes to bring the visual arts to communities that do not appear to have much in the way of a visual culture should not be so easily commended. The patrician's defence of the parcelling out of public art is usually based on the false assumption that culture is lacking in the lives of the deprived. In fact, these communities do have a culture; but it is not a culture that is recognised or registered as such by the middle classes. The ostensibly well-intentioned injection of public art into struggling working-class areas could then be viewed as middle-class 'cultural creep'.

In this context, much of the vandalism of the public art in these areas can be seen not as mindless philistinism, but rather as an attempt by the working classes to preserve the cultural integrity of their territory against the encroachment of mindless gentrification. And this leads to an interesting conundrum. One of the only ways in which public art has been known to foster identity is through rejection. The rejection of bronze gifts from the court of Versailles in eighteenth-century France by the authorities in the Languedoc was a common way for this region to assert its independence from central government. Similarly, today's protests and petitions *against* public art can be more conducive to social cohesion than the provision of public art itself.

A health service?

In this country, hospital providers are among the biggest contributors of money to public art. Private Finance Initiative (PFI) projects have delivered around £10 billion worth of new hospitals to date.⁴⁴ Most of these new hospitals will have fulfilled their 'per cent for art' obligation and will thus have spent something like £100 million on public art over the past decade and a half. One hospital in Essex recently set aside £3 million for public art. After a public outcry, this was pared to what one of the prospective artists termed a 'cheap' £421,000.⁴⁵

There are two reasons for this closeness between healthcare provision and public art. First, public authorities feel that they have to set an example on 'per cent for art', in order to encourage private developers to follow suit. Secondly, public art is considered by many to be demonstrably beneficial to the well-being of patients. 'There is an increasing body of evidence that supports the instrumental value of the work of artists within the health sector', according to the latest report from ixia. One study by Professors Roger Ulrich and Craig Zimring 'found some seven hundred peer-reviewed research studies demonstrating the beneficial impact of the environment on health outcomes'.⁴⁶

A recent Arts Council England review of all the medical literature on the relationship between arts and health published between 1990 and 2004 concluded that there was 'strong evidence of the influence of the arts and humanities in achieving effective approaches to patient management and to the education and training of health practitioners'. It went on to acknowledge 'the relative contribution of different art forms to the final aim of creating a therapeutic healthcare environment'.⁴⁷ At a 2003 conference on art and health, Professor Ulrich went into even more detail: 'Limited but increasing evidence indicates that certain types of psychologically appropriate art consistently elicit positive emotional responses, can promote substantial recovery from stress and foster improvements in

other outcomes such as pain.'⁴⁸

What is interesting about these and other evaluations of the medical impact of public art – bearing in mind that probably £100 million have been spent on it – is how inconclusive it all is. There is no review that states definitively that, if an installation or sculpture is put up, there would be any material improvement in the health or well-being of the average patient. Indeed, there is little mention of contemporary public art at all. Therapeutic qualities are attributed to everything but conventional public art: to soothing music, gardens, good design and arts education.

The only hard evidence on the effects of public art is evidence which concludes that some public art can actually *retard* a patient's recovery: 'Although emotionally appropriate art improves outcomes, there is also evidence that inappropriate art styles or image subject matter can increase stress and worsen other outcomes.'⁴⁹ First-rate work can be especially harmful to patients, says Professor Ulrich:

Even critically acclaimed artwork can be deemed 'bad' if evidence indicates it produces negative reactions in many patients or worsens outcomes. Art varies enormously in subject matter and style and much art is emotionally challenging or provocative. Accordingly, we should not expect that all art would be suitable for high-stress healthcare spaces.⁵⁰

He goes on to describe a case study which showed that heart-surgery patients who had been 'assigned an abstract picture had worse outcomes than patients with no picture at all'. That we might be spending tens of millions of pounds slowing down the recovery of patients through public art provision should make us think again about whether there might not be a more certifiably beneficial way to spend these sums.

Music, for example, has much more supporting evidence for its palliative claims. The evidence of

the benefits of nature is even more demonstrable and longstanding. One of the first evaluations of art in public health (by Linda Moss) cited a trial (again conducted by Professor Ulrich) from the 1980s that proved the effect of leafy views on the health of patients: 'Post-operative hospital stays were shorter, and the demand for analgesic drugs lower, among patients who had a view of trees from their window than among those who could see only a blank wall, but whose condition and treatment were otherwise identical.'⁵¹ Despite the weight of evidence that nature and music benefit public health more than visual art does, the past twenty years have seen an enormous amount of effort and advocacy in favour of 'per cent for art' schemes, which largely focus on the visual arts.

An acknowledgement that the evidence does not support the provision of high-quality public art in hospitals has led many to shift their interest to design. This has its own problems. Design should not be an afterthought. Any new hospital development should be required to be designed well from the outset. Shifting responsibility onto the artist could allow the developer and architect to abrogate their duties.

The relationship between the arts and health is complicated. Some arts have benefits; other arts harm. Spending money on the visual arts offers the least convincing argument. When the visual art is good, it may even be detrimental. When it is beneficial, the art often has (by definition) to be weak. If we wanted patients to recover more quickly, and their stay in hospital to be more pleasant, the millions of pounds spent on public art would be better used in other ways.

A design service?

One of the major reasons why artists are increasingly being given free rein over parts of the public realm is that public art is thought to make places look more attractive. 'If a town or city looks good ... then it "attracts"; if it looks poorly-designed



and in any sense alienating to the person on the street, then people tend to stay away', wrote Terry Hodgkinson, the former head of the now defunct regeneration agency Yorkshire Forward, and the man who spearheaded the embedding of public art in regenerative programmes.⁵² No one would deny Hodgkinson's general point, but one could certainly refute the presumption that public art will inevitably ensure the outcome. Frequently it won't and frequently it doesn't.

'For every well-designed, evocative or engaging piece, there is another example which is understandably loathed by those who have to live near it or which is already making a spectacular contribution to further degrading its surroundings', admitted the Arts Council in 2003.⁵³ We see this most often in the poorest parts of our country, where the desperation of the areas gives social engineers the chance to experiment. In the Gorbals (South Glasgow), an arts-led regeneration programme has littered the new developments with third-rate sculptural clichés by Liz Peden. In Barking, the bleak approach to the town centre is arguably even less easy on the eye as a

result of Joost Van Santen's Lighted Lady of Barking shooting out of one of the roundabouts.

Apologism is a recurring theme: public art is frequently spirited up to correct past architectural errors. One of the worst examples is currently being assembled in Stratford (London). The council there is spending £10 million on Shoal, a series of titanium trees, which it hopes will hide the dishevelled centre of the town. This is an example of what architecture critic Rowan Moore once termed 'the urban equivalents of the little lacy covers people sometimes put on toilet rolls or other objects of blunt function, which serve only to advertise the embarrassing thing they seek to hide'.⁵⁴

Even worse are the acts of apologism for buildings that need no apology. Most of these have just fallen foul of fashion and require simple maintenance. The assumption that art provides effective plastic surgery for unfashionable architecture, and the attempt to corral artists into fixing perceived design problems forces art down the path of decoration, which it successfully rid itself of a hundred years ago. It has also given councillors a way of shirking their responsibilities to their constituents in tackling deficiencies in the buildings themselves.

Guidance on contemporary good practice now suggests that artists should be incorporated into the architectural 'master planning' from the beginning. The reasons given for this are strong: bringing the artist in at an earlier stage prevents the 'turd in the plaza' scenario, where a sculpture with no relevance or relationship to the building in question is lobbed into a forecourt as an awkward afterthought. But one cannot help but feel that this trend is also an underhand way of trying to neuter the potential controversy one might get from letting the individual voice of an artist loose on the public realm. Unless the artist is a name-artist, he or she will inevitably be forced into playing second fiddle to the architect and into thinking even more of utility and pragmatism.

This is ultimately self-defeating. Art is often at its best when it goes against conventional visual wisdom; when it is given free rein to evoke a lack of attractiveness or to complicate the notion of good design. 'The function of public art is de-design', wrote artist Vito Acconci.⁵⁵ Public artists need the freedom to fulfil this aim.

An employment service?

There is one claim that public art makes for itself that is undeniably true: it keeps artists in work. But mostly it keeps artists in administrative work. The boom in public art has accompanied a boom in publicly funded facilitators and commissioners. Around thirty of those who are regularly subsidised by the government through the Arts Council England alone are public art consultancies or commissioning agencies, and most of them are there to agitate for more spending on public art. After galleries, commissioning agencies are the most supported group within the visual arts section of the Arts Council's regularly funded organisations.

The employment claim extends to a belief that public art encourages creativity in general, either in the form of attracting creative business or inspiring a creative energy in those who are already there, including schoolchildren. The first is more easily verified. Creative businesses do seem to huddle around places where public art is also common, as may be seen in the Northern Quarter of Manchester or the Ouseburn area of Newcastle. But it is very hard to claim that public art is the driver of this. Most of the evidence shows that the creation of a cultural quarter is the result of 'the production and location requirements of arts and cultural producers'.⁵⁶

The more fundamental idea that visual artists need the state to survive is patently untrue: visual artists thrive within the commercial sphere. There may be a case for governments to intervene in times of economic hardship. The Roosevelt administration faced such a situation in the 1930s, and it responded

with several initiatives to temporarily help the visual arts. The ways in which these were funded and the relative success rates are instructive. Those that interfered least in the artistic process – such as the Works Progress Administration, which distributed money to any artist who ‘could produce a framed canvas’ – worked best, while those (like the Public Works of Art Project) that prescribed the direction of artistic travel often undermined the artistic aims.⁵⁷

We have a similar divide today between our thriving gallery system and the critically less well regarded public art industry. That the Arts Council pumps so much of its visual arts funds into fortifying a dead, state-engineered corner of the practice is a topsy-turvy state of affairs. The best argument for public art subsidy is that it offers a playground for up-and-coming artists. Film directors’ unprofitable early experiments, for example, will often feed into, enliven and ultimately provide value to the commercial sector. But this does not happen with public art. Very little public art has gone on to make an impact in the gallery system. The government would be far wiser to provide indirect subsidies – such as tax breaks for artists, for example, or subsidies to artists’ studios – and remove itself from stylistic decisions.

The state’s desire to subsidise employment opportunities for visual artists by providing public art is objectionable in another, more fundamental way. The state has a duty to shape the labour market according to the country’s needs. The arts are already saturated: creative arts graduates are more likely to be unemployed three years after leaving college than the graduates of any other subject. The arts industries may bring in wealth; but so do other industries, and often in a healthier way. If public artworks act as a kind of recruiting agency for the young, we should think about whether this is what our economy needs.

Do we want more unemployed art graduates? Do we want more large, formerly productive Northern

cities to peg their futures to the unpredictable creative industries? The arts are an undeniable asset to the UK. But by offering up unsustainable artistic seductions to the young and by doing nothing to encourage similar feelings for our other industries, we are diverting talent away from industries that will be crucial to an economically viable future and into ones that will not.

Postscript: Evaluation

Public art’s alliance with government policy has forced it to submit to statistical review. The government has had to justify its belief in public art’s social and economic powers. But this has not been easy – not least because no group on earth resists scrutiny more vigorously than the arts community. ‘[W]hen an artist is asked how he or she would assess the success of a public art project, the response is more likely to be “whether I can sleep at night” than an assessment of economic or social factors.’⁵⁸

At first the public art advocates responded by rubbishing the idea that evaluation was possible. François Matarasso, who was one of the key figures to convince the Labour government of the socio-economic value of the arts and who is now a member of the Arts Council England (ACE) governing body, wrote: ‘Over-zealous pursuit of scientific objectivity, and the internal validity of evaluation processes, is inappropriate and unhelpful approaches [*sic*] to the evaluation of social programmes and especially arts projects.’⁵⁹

When they finally did start to scrutinise public art projects, the approach was tentative and corrupt. Analysis was, virtually without exception, taken on by advocacy groups, many of which were able to profit from the findings of their reports. Methodological problems riddled these documents: some surveys had leading questions; others used statistical manipulation. Many focused on process rather than outcomes, as if they were internal team-building exercises. All sought evidence for a predetermined conclusion. None started out from a

position of objective neutrality, especially not on the question of public art’s efficacy.

Since then, there has been some acknowledgement of these evaluative failures and some well-intentioned attempts to remedy them. As yet, however, these have been merely in the form of evaluations of evaluations, with suggestions for good practice. No independent, substantive, verbally literate, statistically numerate analysis of any public art project has been attempted. While the claims that public art is of benefit have become grander and grander, the evidence has remained anaemic.

In this evidence-poor environment, some bodies have resorted to hawking around any figures they can get their hands on, however tendentious. The Gateshead Council website boasts that Antony Gormley’s Angel of the North is ‘seen by more than one person every second, 90,000 every day or 33 million every year’.⁶⁰ These figures include all those who happen to be driving past the sculpture at 70 miles an hour.

Still, an attempt to measure the claims made on public art’s behalf has begun. Its economic impact, its social impact, its effect on traffic and health, on crime and deprivation, on identity and littering – all are now under scrutiny. The only aspect of public art that can now hang loose, easy in the knowledge that no one is checking up on it, is quality. Aesthetic integrity, artistic aim, practical success – none of these aspects is examined by the local council planning departments, the Arts Council or any other body. The aspect of public art that should matter most is the aspect that is most neglected.

This was not always the case. From 1924 to 1999, public art was reviewed by the Royal Fine Art Commission (RFAC). This body was set up in the wake of the First World War to deal with ‘questions of public amenity or of artistic importance’.⁶¹ Initially it was convened to provide some dispassionate order and aesthetic judgement to the numerous new war memorials that were springing up across the country, but subsequently it was given control

of tackling anything from the design of firemen’s helmets to town planning.⁶²

The seventeen-strong committee was not large enough to investigate every aesthetic matter in the public realm. ‘Where advice was sought, they made a judgement’, explains a former deputy secretary, Peter Stewart. They would also make sure to review those things that ‘seemed significant’. But theoretically they could inspect ‘any project or development which in the opinion of the Commission may appear to affect amenities of a national or public character’.⁶³

The Commission’s decisions were not binding, but it did have ‘the authority to call in schemes and, like a Select Committee of the House of Commons, to insist on the attendance of all those involved with a particular scheme at one of its meetings’.⁶⁴ And when developers went against its guidance, public inquiries were convened.⁶⁵ By the 1990s, it had eight staff and convened twice weekly. It had a budget of £700,000, but its members received no salary.

The Commission’s detractors saw it as a clubby, secretive, elitist and potentially fishy body. However, its many admirers understood its importance, and the main thrust of its work – architectural review – continued essentially unchanged when it was replaced by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE). However, this new body lost the public art remit. Stewart – who became a director of CABE’s design review after the RFAC – says that it was CABE’s own decision to cut public art out, because ‘it wasn’t considered core business’ and it seemed odd to have a panel of architects reviewing art.

In its final years, even RFAC, which had one sculptor and one painter, took a step back from public art reviews. This throws up an intriguing fact: in the two decades since RFAC withdrew from the qualitative review of public art, the number of public artworks has proliferated and the general quality has plummeted. ↻

3

Public Art: The Commissioners

Bureaucrats and politicians

All public art projects either originate with or pass through local authorities. In either case, bureaucrats (and occasionally politicians) are in charge. Depending on the council, this could be the arts development officer, the planning officer or (increasingly) the 'public art officer'. According to ixia's latest report, there are now 210 public art officers distributed around the country, costing the taxpayer around £7 million.⁶⁶

That such a handsome slice of local government money goes into public art administration shows the extent to which the practice has become a tool of public policy. It also speaks volumes about why public art finds itself in the state it is – why there is so much of it and why it looks the way it does. For some of the least successful public art schemes are concocted in the bureaucratic bowels of local government.

Local authority-vetted public art is committee art: compromised, politicised and safe. A perfect example of this is the £150,000 row of stick-figure acrobats who cheer-lead the way to the First Street development (Manchester). 'Most people can think of better things to spend £150,000 of public money on', said one local councillor. When the leader of the council came to the work's defence in her blog, she invoked socio-economics: 'Developing the businesses and jobs that will take us out of recession depend on innovation and creativity. To encourage creativity we need to show creativity and one way of doing that is through public art.'⁶⁷

A more adventurous scheme came out of Barking and Dagenham Council. The A13 Artscape series was going to be 'the largest public art project in Europe'. Yet it has been bedevilled by financial mismanagement, cancellations, public criticism and critical disregard. A 25-metre Kestrel sculpture was axed after incorrect costing, while three 30-metre tall wooden towers that were, according to the chief artist-architect Tom de Paor, going to 'make the Angel of the North look like a toy' were never built.⁶⁸

Those projects that were given the go-ahead included the Lighted Lady of Barking (a huge, abstract sculpture, its garish spectrum of night-time lighting 'reflecting on our current multicoloured society and celebrating the benefits of this rich mix')⁶⁹ and a pair of pyramids – Thomas Heatherwick's Twin Cones, which have been nicknamed 'Madonna's Bra' by locals. The project received the largest ever public art lottery grant – £3.895 million. Supplementary funds from the council, the ACE, Transport for London and private sources pushed the sum up to £11 million. All this has come at a time when the council has been forced to admit that it does not have the money to do anything for its crumbling housing estates.

Despite the rancour, accountability is limited and information on figures and facts scarce. My request for details of Gateshead's art policy, for example, was only granted under Freedom of Information legislation. When local disgruntlement over Inverness Council's attempt to rejuvenate its old town through a £300,000 public art scheme (which included two artists wrapping the centre in 45 miles of red wool) led the local newspaper to investigate the scheme, the body that oversaw the events, Inverness Old Town Art (IOTA), declined to help. 'Focusing on costs of events may mean the actual social and promotional benefits to the area and arts community are overlooked', it said.

Many commissions from public art officers play either by politically correct or by populist rules. Artists are often local and are encouraged to indulge their interest in sustainability and community cohesion. Heritage clichés are sought: anchors, shells and fish for ports; tools and workers for industrial heartlands. If in doubt, doves, rainbow arches and mothers are a safe bet. Or a little more excitement can be engendered through a community dragon...

Some councils have attempted to institute an 'arm's length' policy by bringing in arts consultants. In 2006, Ashford Council hired eleven artists to



spruce up the local ring road in advance of the arrival of the Tour de France. It spent £70,000 on a public art consultation programme, a further £535,000 on the artworks, and an undisclosed sum on arts consultant RKL. Funding came from several bodies, including Kent County Council, Arts Council England, South East England Development Agency and English Partnerships.

A Victorian building was wrapped in newspaper. A tent was erected and became an embassy for Nomadland, a borderless country 'for people who want to be part of something more than a plot of land'. One of the artists, Michael Pinsky, claimed the project would 'put [Ashford] on the map' (something it has yet to do). The critical and public reception was far from favourable. Car-user groups and local residents lambasted Pinsky's Lost O installation (a copse of traffic signs) as 'ridiculous'⁷⁰ and 'dangerous'.⁷¹ *The Times's* Louise Cohen called it 'completely mad'.⁷²

Farming out responsibility to consultants is not guaranteed to deflect public protest. After all, the act of farming out is an additional cost to the

taxpayer. And the offloading of the commissioning process onto outsiders rather undermines the point of spending £7 million nationwide on having in-house public art officers. When the consultants need consultants, something is clearly wrong.

Not all of the public art officer's time is taken up with commissioning. Much of it is focused on evangelising for 'per cent for art' and writing up public art strategies, which enshrine the instrumentalist vision and perpetuate the need for public art and public art officers. As of 2006, 61 per cent of local planning authorities made reference to public art in planning documents.⁷³

But however much local government bureaucracy can politicise public art, it is as nothing when compared to what happens when politicians get their hands on the commissioning process. When local councillors take on public art provision, the consequences are usually disastrous. Two examples of this can be found in Westminster and St Helens. In Westminster, the sorry scheme is a two-year project called the City of Sculpture Festival. In 2010, the council offered over twenty locations to several local sculpture galleries to create a 'giant open-air gallery'. The consequent batch of artworks has received more critical mockery than any public art in living memory.

'As the 414 bus swings left from the Edgware Road at Marble Arch you avert your eyes, hoping you won't have to look at the thing looming up in front of you for a single second longer than you have to', wrote Richard Dormant in the *Spectator*.

Even so, you know it's there – a blot on the sky, a gulp of polluted air. I'm talking about a 33-ft-high bronze sculpture in the form of a decapitated horse, muzzle pointed downwards, in the middle of Marble Arch. The epitome of ghastly good taste, it looks like an expensive knick-knack from Harrods blown up to a size that would have appealed to Saddam Hussein.⁷⁴

The festival has been responsible for a family of five plastic jelly babies (courtesy of Mauro Perucchetti), Jeff Lowe's clumsy construction in Berkeley Square, and numerous other second-rate works scattered around important parts of London. They will remain in the most prominent, most widely visited parts of the capital through to the Diamond Jubilee and the Olympics. The reason why Westminster could be turned over to this 'expensive tat' was that the council exercises no quality control.

In charge was the 'built environment team', with the guiding hand of Councillor Robert Davis, deputy leader of the council and cabinet member for the built environment. The Public Art Advisory Panel, which for fourteen years had maintained a check on artistic standards, had recently been scrapped for 'political reasons', according to a spokesman for Westminster Council. A former member of the panel, Maurice Blik, predicted that this would usher in 'banal, safe, dreary and unambiguous work' in Westminster. He was right.

More worrying is the fact that the council has resorted to auctioning off public space to the highest bidder:

Mayfair galleries (and one foreign embassy) have paid for ... sculptures in Soho, Cavendish and Berkeley Squares, and in both Victoria Gardens and Brown Hart Gardens. The City of Sculpture Festival looks to me like no more than an open-air showroom for a few favoured galleries hoping to flog their wares to credulous visitors from abroad.⁷⁵

A more egregious example of bad practice in public art provision could not be imagined.

In St Helens there was only one offending sculpture: Jaume Plensa's £2 million carving of a baby's head, *The Dream*. The website for the project defensively explains exactly how much money was spent and which sources provided the funding:



[The £1.88 million] funding was explicitly secured for public art and/or regeneration activity on the Sutton Manor site. This means that it could not simply have been spent on other local public services, and in all likelihood most of it would not have been spent in St Helens at all. No local taxpayers [*sic*] money was used to fund *Dream*.⁷⁶

A glance at any local newspaper quickly makes it clear why such an aggressive vindication of the funding was necessary. 'A 2 million pound scheme to erect a concrete sculpture on top of a former slag heap has been condemned as "bonkers" by residents', wrote Simon Boyle for *Click Liverpool* in March 2009, under the heading "The Dream"... or a public art nightmare?⁷⁷ Local MPs have condemned it, as did the director of the Liverpool Academy of Arts, June Lornie:

Two million pounds is a lot of money to spend with a Spanish artist to create a sculpture that seems to have no relevance or connection

locally. This is supposed to be an iconic sculpture but it says nothing at all about the area ... Using a Spanish designer to create this very simple sculpture of a head seems really wrong.⁷⁸

Local concerns were ignored, even though the predictions that it would end up 'covered in graffiti' proved correct. Within a year, vandals had covered the sculpture with tags, using the coats on which it had been built. The Angel of the North effect was not replicated. Anyone within the industry would have known that to have had any such goal was foolish. But with much of the decision-making process in the hands of politicians alone, there was no possibility of making the scheme more realistic.

Not every public art scheme delivered by bureaucrats or politicians has gone this way: the procurement of art for Harlow new town in the 1950s was exemplary. The chief architect in charge of the master-planning of the town, however, Sir Frederick Gibberd, was an art connoisseur and a friend of Henry Moore's. According to Moore, he was 'particularly concerned with the placing of the sculpture in the town's centre'.⁷⁹ Gibberd decided that all the public art was to be installed 'at places where people meet'. He also insisted that 'the purpose of the sculpture is not to decorate the town – it is not a sort of costume jewellery – but it is there to be enjoyed for its own sake as visual art and to add interest and visual diversity to the urban spaces in which it is set'. His expertise was supplemented by that of Sir Philip Hendy, director of the National Gallery, who became the chairman of the new town's trust.⁸⁰

The public art of many postwar new towns (including Milton Keynes and Glenrothes) was equally well chosen, benefiting from the broad education of the chief architects and developers involved. Some form of arts expertise is crucial if politicians or bureaucrats are to get things right.

'Per cent for art'

While there is no official 'per cent for art' scheme in Britain, as there is on the continent and in some states in America, there are Section 106 obligations (under the Town and Country Planning Act). These give local authorities the power to oblige private developers to set aside a portion of their capital costs to provide for certain local services. Wielding this law, many councils have implemented 'per cent for art' schemes in all but name. And these schemes account for the bulk of the public art commissioned today. They are also to blame for some of the most shameful examples of public art on these isles.

'Per cent for art' schemes usually unfold in one of three directions. The property developer is: a) coerced into commissioning a work of art; b) given too much independence, with no checks or balances; c) admitting ignorance in the field, is forced to bring in state-funded public art commissioning agencies or consultants – a side effect of which is that local authorities are obliged to hire public art officers to liaise between the parties. Whichever the route, the result is either poor public art or waste – or both.

Let us examine the first and most common problem associated with 'per cent for art' schemes, namely the reluctance of many developers to accept the public art obligation. The Home Builders Federation (HBF) is a perfect example. It made its objections explicit in a response to a draft Supplementary Planning Document from Cardiff Council, writing that the public art requirements would 'make developments unviable': 'The Council appear to be making the provision of public art a complex and time consuming process, which will discourage developers from providing it.'⁸¹ Interviews with public art officers confirm that the HBF's position is not uncommon.

The head of public art at Barking and Dagenham Council told me that 'public art is not at the forefront of most capital projects' and is 'often the first thing to go'. The council pushes for it where it can, but sometimes it has to 'nag them'. Not all public art



officers think coercion is the best way. Dundee's public art officer says he tries not to force developers into projects: 'There's nothing worse than rubbing the developer up the wrong way.'

Warnings of what would happen if 'per cent for art' was made obligatory were voiced early on. 'When a large organisation commissions artists to create works but does not have its own particular vision, the result is usually irrelevant trash or, at best, amusing decoration', said architect Sir Richard MacCormac at a public art symposium in the 1980s. 'Only those projects that have a sense of what needs to be signified end up with significance.'⁸²

The consequence of coercion is that developers plump for the easiest route, which is usually cheap art or cheap artists. Glasgow City Council, for example, mandated developers Redrow to initiate a 'per cent for art' scheme for the redevelopment of the Gorbals. The initial response was not enthusiastic: 'We would have developers coming to us at the end of the project asking "are you serious about this?" and the art ended up being tagged on as a bit of an after-thought', reported the *Guardian* in 2002, quoting project manager David Hogg.⁸³ It was rather a costly and messy afterthought. The £100,000 sculpture, *The Gatekeeper* – made up of Perspex, plywood and glue, became known as 'The Hingin' [Hanging] Witch', and in 2008 was badly vandalised.

Many architects have their own issues with public art obligations. For those schooled in a functionalist tradition, the idea of incorporating

a piece of sculpture into their work would be like asking Rodin to paint his bronzes. The result is often a standoff. And this shows in the art, which is usually dumped tokenistically in the space in front of the new development – a phenomenon that was dubbed by architectural practice SITE 'the turd in the plaza'. 'In a typical commission the name-architect is called in to make his well-known aesthetic statement in his unified style, after which a name-artist is summoned in to finish it off, or cancel it out with juxtapositions', wrote the architectural historian Charles Jencks.⁸⁴

This kind of impasse is happily rare today. The introduction of public art officers (though generally undesirable) has calmed these potentially tense relationships between developers, architects, council planners and artists. Those local authorities that signed up to 'per cent for art' early on lacked guidance and bear the scars. Basingstoke and Deane, for example, which incorporated the 'per cent for art' principle in their planning documents in 1989, are littered with anonymously tasteful or hopelessly kitsch pieces of art. There are forty-nine of them to be precise: an assortment of overdesigned gates, bollards, figurative bronzes and community tiles.

But the opposite behaviour from developers can be just as unfortunate: too much enthusiasm and there is very little stopping developers from doing what they want. The BBC's £3 million spread of art for its redevelopment of Broadcasting House, levied

through 'per cent for art', saw BBC management dictating artistic terms to artist Jaume Plensa – something that proved rather ill-judged. Plensa was required to change his original idea (which the BBC considered too outrageous) and was asked to inscribe a James Fenton poem into the inverted spire – lines that are not even legible. In Dundee, the developers of Overgate mall in the centre of the city were given free rein, for fear that any intervention might drive them away. A set of uneventful bronze badges now adorns the sides of the building.

The most common model today is for developers to free themselves from the decision-making process entirely. Commissioning agencies or art consultants are instead asked in or compete for a tender. But this route has its problems. One issue is that the project can end up with too many people being involved. In the commissioning and installation of Thomas Heatherwick's *Blue Carpet* in Newcastle, for example, there were highway designers, landscape architects, traffic managers, representatives of the adjacent gallery, a structural consultant, materials researchers, a services development manager – as well as the artist. To add consultants to this mix can make things seriously unwieldy.

With all these potential problems, one might imagine that councils and governments would be put off 'per cent for art'. But such schemes also offer cover. By coercing developers to do the dirty work, the public art lobby can argue that most of the money for public art projects does not actually come from the public purse. In fact, this is not entirely true. As a Section 106 obligation, all the 'per cent for art' money could go into any number of other public pots: education, housing, health, etc. But it doesn't: the public coffers are therefore denied substantial sums because of 'per cent for art' schemes.

Of course, this linkage is even clearer in capital developments in health and education, which are delivered (though often via private sources) by the state. In these, the money is much more obviously diverted from other public pots. And it is no wonder

that these 'per cent for art' schemes often provoke the most vociferous public disapproval. When Broomfield Hospital in Essex commissioned a £3 million public art project just as Mid Essex Hospitals Trust was attempting to cut £40 million from its budget, it was understandable that there would be a backlash. In response, the proposals had to be slimmed down to £421,000.

One 'per cent for art' scheme that bucked the trend and delivered a thicket of sculpture of extraordinary quality was also one of the first: the 1980s redevelopment of Broadgate (London). Two key features of this 'per cent for art' scheme distinguish it from all the others. One, it was wholly independent of all local authority control. And two, both the head of the development, Sir Stuart Lipton, and the development director, David Blackburn, knew their onions. Blackburn and Lipton were art connoisseurs. They acquired twenty-four sculptures for the complex – two-thirds of them new commissions, including what was to become one of London's finest pieces of public art, Richard Serra's exceptional 55-foot metal wigwam, *Fulcrum*.

The commercial imperative

Private developers do not need 'per cent for art' to justify new public art schemes. They have every right to go it alone, and many often do. Given this scenario, the outcomes are even more likely to fail on artistic grounds. Why? Because private developers' concerns – primarily commercial – are rarely conducive to the commissioning of good public art. One might divide the resultant artistic 'turkeys' into two categories: the publicity stunts and the gentrifiers.

The most notorious example of the first type is Paul Day's *The Meeting Place* at St Pancras station. There is no love lost between this bronze and the critics. The *Guardian*'s Jonathan Jones called it 'a big piece of crap'.⁸⁵ The *Burlington Magazine* wrote that it was 'as romantic as a couple who have just been refused a mortgage'.⁸⁶ Stephen Bayley went for the artist: 'he must be stopped', howled Bayley in

his *Observer* review.⁸⁷ The public has been no more charitable. High Speed One (HS1), which now owns the work, admits that the vast majority of the people who write to it are critical. ‘Some like it. Some ask “When are you going to melt it down?”’, a spokesman told me. Day’s work shows the risks of encouraging public art when no quality checks are in place.

The problems with *The Meeting Place* are to be found in every aspect of the commissioning process: in the intentions, in the brief and in the decision-making process. The explicit reason for the million-pound sculpture was money. ‘The commercial imperative was crucial’, explained Ben Ruse, a spokesman for HS1. The work was commissioned by HS1’s parent company, London and Continental Railways (LCR), which wanted a sculpture to evoke an atmosphere that would encourage people to visit and to shop. The company itself took charge of the £1 million commission, and the judging panel was made up of LCR staff. It hired an arts consultancy, Future City, but appeared not to use its advice.

LCR had very clear ideas of what it wanted: it wanted the artwork to make the station less of a ‘shithole’. It did not want ‘a piece that was so distracting that it would take your eye away from the architecture’. It wanted the art to be ‘very accessible’. As Ruse explained, ‘Even though it hasn’t been in vogue for a very long time, large figurative sculpture seemed to us to fit the bill.’

The company sent Paul Day a brief. According to Day, this stipulated that he was to make ‘a bronze sculpture which must not take up more than 4.5 metres of floor, must be as iconic and memorable as the Statue of Liberty, and must emphasise the romantic nature of train travel’. LCR admits that it was a ‘very challenging brief’. It went straight to Day after spotting his *Battle of Britain* monument on the South Bank. But the company did not leave him to his own devices: when Day’s early maquettes showed the couple ‘playing tonsil tennis’, he was asked to tone the sculpture down.

The artist was asked by LCR to remove a carved

suicide on the pedestal frieze, and he was required to make the faces more ethnically ambivalent. ‘We wanted them to be multicultural’, said the HS1 spokesman. Another LCR public art commission, Martin Jennings’s *Betjeman* bronze, was more successful – not least because more people who knew something about art were involved.

Acknowledgement of the failure of *The Meeting Place* was demonstrated in a subsequent public art commission by LCR, the £2 million *Ebbsfleet Horse* by Mark Wallinger. Not only did the company now include a full-fledged public consultation process in the *Bluewater Shopping Centre*, but it also set up a distinguished panel of art experts to guide the final choice. As a consequence, a very fine artist is delivering a very fine idea.

The second kind of public art that results from private developer commissioning is what I call the ‘gentrifier’ type. Quality is not its goal. Rather, its purpose is to signify that one is entering an area of wealth and gentility. Much of the art in this vein suffers from a suffocating tastefulness. Examples are to be found in most towns, often on redeveloped quaysides or in squares. There’s Colin Rose’s giant slinky, *Swirl* (2009), behind the *Baltic Centre* (Gateshead) and the tedious £100,000 *Ishinki Touchstone* (1996) outside *Bridgewater Hall* (Manchester) (see page 22). Gentrifiers are there to placate and soothe. They sap the world of energy. They represent the very opposite of the artistic experience.

The regeneration industry

The idea that art should have a socio-economic function emerged just as the regeneration industry was taking root. It was only natural that the two worlds should join forces. They were natural bedfellows: public art offered a cheap and relatively easy way of adding value to redevelopments. The consequence has been twenty years of frenzied art commissioning from numerous regeneration bodies.

The prototype was the *London Docklands*

development, and many of the bad practices that became a characteristic part of the regeneration industry’s commissioning style – gigantism, instrumentalism and economic safeness – took hold there. The *London Docklands Development Corporation* (LDDC) was among the first to buy into the link between regeneration and public art. *Creating a Real City: An arts action programme for London Docklands*,⁸⁸ its public art strategy, stated explicitly and boldly that the arts were ‘as important an ingredient of urban regeneration as the physical, economic and social aspects’ (the Arts Council had accepted the same argument only a year earlier). And in some of its work it excelled. A crucial element in its successes was a policy of waiting for ideas to come to it. One of those ideas was Damien Hirst’s 1988 *Freeze* show.

In public art, too, there was some surprisingly sound practice, including a policy of recommendation rather than coercion: ‘Compulsion was thought to bring its own problems – token art unfeelingly handled, or budgets cynically diverted into interior decoration. So the policy was to recommend, rather than require.’⁸⁹ ‘Per cent for art’ schemes were rejected, and in many cases they were not needed: at *Olympia & York* (Canary Wharf) or *NCC* (East India Dock), developers took on public art schemes unprompted. But these positives were frequently cancelled out by a *laissez-faire* attitude to artistic quality and stylistic unity. Up until the mid-1990s, site managers were in control of commissioning. Quality and style would depend capriciously on each team, which meant strong new commissions here, cookie-cutter installations there. The turd in the plaza was not uncommon.

Docklands saw the birth of British sculptural gigantism. In 1992, £250,000 were sunk into three pieces for *Limehouse Link* tunnel. This became the single biggest commission in London since the war – and one of the most anonymous. All three pieces exemplified the problem of adding art to a pre-existing construction. Both *Zadok Ben-David*’s

enormous circle of silhouettes, *Restless Dream*, and *Nigel Hall*’s untitled black and white abstract were swamped by the busy postmodern patterning of the brickwork of the tunnel facade. They also highlight the foolishness of commissioning for roads: you can only inspect these pieces for as long as the speed of your car allows you to.

The final years of the LDDC’s tenure at the site saw public art fork in two directions. The drafting in of art professionals onto judging panels led to high-quality sculptures from *Anthony Caro* and *William Pye*. But at the same time the instrumentalist vision of where public art should head also came into play. Community art pieces were encouraged by organisations like the state-funded *Art for Change*. The result was a classic piece of political public art, the *Dragon’s Gate* (*Tower Hamlets*), which had no artistic merit whatsoever but did reference the Chinese heritage of the local area, thus ticking the boxes of the multicultural policy commitments that were then becoming fashionable.

The *Docklands* experiment marked the high point of early regenerative public art. Most other early schemes navigated the public art scene far less successfully. The choices of the *Tyne and Wear Development Corporation* (TWDC) exemplified the gentrifying kind of public art referred to above. *Newcastle*’s east quayside now boasts a huge marble acorn at the centre of a water feature, two mythical bronzes, the obligatory maritime sculpture and a community piece. Most of them stand incongruously and apologetically in front of restaurant chains.

The specifics of the commissioning and construction of one of these gives a good insight into the barriers that this sort of economically driven regeneration art faces. *Andre Wallace*’s *River God* was selected by a panel made up of members of *Terry Farrell Associates*, *Branson McGuckin Associates*, TWDC and the *Newcastle* planning office. The original plans were altered because of ‘an inability to guarantee safety and long-term maintenance’. And an originally free-hanging chain was subsequently



welded to the column 'to avoid potential problems with noise'.⁹⁰

The number of regeneration bodies proliferated hugely under Labour. They came in all shapes and sizes, their names presumptuously hopeful. There were the Neighbourhood Renewal Programmes, the New Deal for Communities, the Urban Cultural Programmes and the Regional Development Agencies. They were all united in a belief in public art – economic regeneration couldn't work without it. An instrumentalist vision took hold that focused less on gentrification and more on social transformation. Two models were taken up: the 'community' approach and the 'Angel effect' ideal.

The Gorbals Arts Project, an arts-led regeneration agency, swamped one of the most deprived areas of Glasgow with an artistically execrable series of artworks. Liz Peden's seven monuments include a coral leaf, a metal tree, a downcast rose (that claims to be a war memorial) and a bronze and chrome rendering of the iconic photograph of local Gorbals boys playing about in high heels that is a travesty of the original image. If good

public art is thought to be capable of reviving a neighbourhood, is work such as this not as likely to sink an area forever?

Landmark artworks like the Angel of the North offered regeneration agencies a seductive alternative. North Lanarkshire Council pinned its hopes of rejuvenation on one enormous new project, the irredeemably kitsch silver mermaid, Arria, which was supposed to transform the depressed new town of Cumbernauld. Here public art has become a fashion accessory, the equivalent of wreathing oneself in fake gold.

This aspirational sleight of hand is so well known that passers-by are more likely to associate the gesture with desperation and poverty than with a town that is self-confident and worthy of a visit. Even Anish Kapoor's impressive Temenos, a sweeping net across Middlesbrough's dock, cannot hide the hopelessness of the local economic environment. In fact, the Kapoor acts as a symbol that all is not right. Why else would anyone erect such an enormous artwork unless they felt the place needed geeing up?

Today, councils commission 'landmark sculptures', as if they come ready made. But landmark status cannot be pre-arranged. Trying to manufacture the 'Angel' effect will never work. Some within the regeneration industry have realised this and have moved on from gigantism, helped along the way by the recession. Today development agencies' aims are more modest, involve the public more, and are more successful.

In Barking, the enormous multicoloured new development has been given a gentler edge with help from the architect-artists at muf, which, in The Folly (2005–08), managed to deliver a community project that is strong and surprising. In the centre of Glasgow, several regenerative surges over the past two decades have led to a number of appealing and unusual artworks around the Merchant City, including a series from the late 1990s that sought 'deliberately non-grandiose artworks for public

sites'.⁹¹ Modesty was also the watchword at a John O'Groats public art consultation process in December 2011: the locals firmly rejected any proposal to transform the down-at-heel Scottish village with a sculptural giant.

Art quangos

The Arts Council shapes public art both through commissioning schemes itself and through funding numerous public arts consultants and art commissioning bodies to commission and coordinate on its behalf. Consultants and commissioners have become increasingly crucial to local authorities, private developers and regional development agencies. Delegating authority for the various delicate procedures that make up the commissioning of public art (including putting together a tendering process, a brief and contract) to specialists has become recommended good practice. And in theory the principle seems sound. There is surely no better way to prevent the politicisation of public art than to remove responsibility for it from local authorities and quangos, and place it instead in the hands of independent professionals.

But that would only be true if the commissioning agencies and consultancies were truly independent. In reality they are not. Almost all are at least partially funded by the state. Over £4 million of Arts Council England money was last year spent on thirty public art commissioning agencies. Many more receive one-off subsidies. The upshot is that the principles of the agencies reiterate verbatim the instrumentalist goals of official public arts policy.

Public art agency Beam, for example, which receives funding from three separate public pots (ACE, Wakefield Council and West Yorkshire Grants), states that its aim is to provide public art that is 'a powerful contributor to personal, economic and community well being'.⁹² Arc, which gets its funding from half a dozen government grant-giving agencies, seeks to 'foster positive social and

environmental change'.⁹³ Chrysalis Arts professes its 'commitment to environmentally responsible arts practice and a belief that artists can transform places and regenerate communities'.⁹⁴

The artistic expertise of consultants can be invaluable. But even when it is, there is no guarantee that they will be listened to. We have seen this in relation to the commissioning of The Meeting Place at St Pancras: LCR had hired the consultants Future City, but nevertheless went its own way in the final stages of the commissioning process. Private developers are particularly unscrupulous about ignoring expert professional artistic advice. As are politicians. The toothless nature of commissioning agencies means that they are not able to provide effective quality checks.

But then neither is the Arts Council useful in this respect. Quality alone is no longer the Arts Council's goal in public art. Its direct grants are often even more obviously politically driven. This is visible in the box-ticking choices of the twelve new public art commissions for the Cultural Olympiad. For example, what drew the Arts Council of Wales to Marc Rees's submission for the Olympiad, Adain Avion, a £500,000 travelling installation, was that it would engage 'the maximum number of people' and provide a home for 'community participation'.⁹⁵ The South West of England, meanwhile, gets Alex Hartley's Nowhereisland, a rocky islet that the artist has spent £500,000 dragging from Norwegian waters to Weymouth, where it will become an imaginary nation with a touring embassy. The purpose? To provide 'activities' on 'citizenship, land grab, climate [sic] change and hospitality'.⁹⁶

The principles on which commissioning agencies and arts consultancies were founded are important. That the commissioning of public art should be taken out of the hands of those who know little or nothing about this practice is right and proper. But, with the devolution of commissioning powers to state-funded administrators, it is questionable whether this has actually happened.



What we certainly have seen is an increase in public subsidy to the public arts. The result is that most public art schemes find themselves subsidised four times over: through 1) local authorities paying for work; 2) arts councils funding arts consultancies; 3) local councils hiring arts consultancies; and 4) regeneration quangos supplementing local authority contributions. Considering the economic claims made on public art's behalf, it is odd that none of these agencies or consultancies can stand on their own two feet.

The people

The general public is not entirely missing from the commissioning picture, and it is not entirely blameless for the deluge of poor public art. Residents associations, memorial trusts and local arts and crafts groups may play a fraction of the role that they did in shaping the artistic landscape of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but they still exert a visual impact on our cities. Indeed, they can occasionally exert an influence far out of proportion to their real public support.

Memorials are the major currency in which these groups deal. And their leveraging of the emotions behind the events that they seek to memorialise has led to the tyranny of sentiment in the commissioning of much statuary. One notorious case is the *Animals in War* Memorial on Park Lane (London). Virtually every aspect of this work has

been damned by critics, artists and commentators. Richard Dorment called it 'a bucket of sentimental kitsch'.⁹⁷ *The Economist* wrote that the inscriptions were bossy and the horses mawkish.⁹⁸

Yet everything about the commissioning process suggested that it might head this way. The committee that chose the artist was formed of two vets, the head of a pet insurance company, a colonel, a brigadier, a major-general – and Jilly Cooper. Only the set-up of the tendering competition involved the services of anyone even remotely involved in the visual arts. Yet the scheme took all the obligations set out by Westminster Council in its stride, including the council's own demands for quality: 'Westminster requires only the best quality examples of new sculptural work for its streets and spaces ...'⁹⁹

The council also overlooked another part of its 2008 guidelines: 'The City Council would normally expect commissions to be undertaken by established artists of international renown.'¹⁰⁰ A quick glance at the website of the artist, David Backhouse, would reveal that the sculptor had developed limited 'international renown'. That the memorial was paid for out of a mixture of private donations (and therefore would not be a burden on Westminster Council) and that it had sentimental weight allowed the statue to override its aesthetic failings.

This is not uncommon. The historical facts of war have a tendency to blinker our aesthetic judgement.

The Royal Fine Art Commission (RFAC) came about for this reason. It was set up just a few years after the end of the First World War, at a time when there was a sudden proliferation of memorials, none of which were commissioned according to any strict standards. It was thought that the only way to bring aesthetics to bear on such emotionally charged sculptures was to create an independent body of the great and the good, who might be sufficiently detached and respected to halt the worst of the memorials without causing offence.

The current craze for such memorialisation is arguably far less grounded in good artistic understanding. A list of contemporary British sculptural memorials is, in fact, a list of some of the worst sculpture in the public realm. There's Paul Day's *Battle of Britain* frieze, John Mills' *Women of World War II* monument and the Michael Jackson statue at Craven Cottage.

There is also, more broadly, the problem of the tyranny of the public. The democratic mandate that many residents associations claim to have frequently spurs them to lord it over the public realm. One early public art scheme in Glasgow in the 1990s, the Glasgow Milestones Scheme, demonstrates the danger of blindly championing locally driven schemes without artistic checks.

The Glasgow Milestones Scheme was a grassroots response to the city becoming European Capital of Culture in 1990. To a great extent, it followed an admirable framework for attempting to re-engage the public with public art. Funded by the Henry Moore Foundation, the Glasgow Sculpture Studios distributed funds, guidance and support on finance and administration to local communities, but beyond this it tried to encourage 'commissioning groups to work on their own initiative'.¹⁰¹

What makes a Milestone different from other types of public sculpture is that it is commissioned by local people who choose the location, the theme, the artists and the

winning design, through a process of discussion and research. A Milestone is not a piece of sculpture which is landed on a community without their consent – it can only happen if people want it to happen and bring it about by working together at every stage of the process, from the initial idea to the launch of the finished work.¹⁰²

This was a noble path that sadly delivered a trail of dreadful work, including Helen Denerley's *Govan Milestone* (1994) – a rainbow arch with kissing birds.¹⁰³

The professionals

Much modern public art lectures its audience. Murals encourage you to find common cause with your neighbour. Cheery heads ask you to look positively into the future. Doves proclaim peace. Women hold babies. Workers clasp tools... Committee art – especially socio-economically motivated committee art – encourages this sort of cliché. And the state-supported public art industry returns again and again to the sort of artists who provide it.

There is, however, another model. There are numerous institutions that have, by and large, escaped the instrumentalist clutches of the Arts Council and its subsidiaries. Organisations like Artangel, the Fourth Plinth Project and the Liverpool Biennial have been commissioning exceptional site-specific public art for years. Artangel introduced us to Rachel Whiteread's concrete conundrum *House* (1993) and Roger Hiorns's alchemised council flat *Seizure*. The Fourth Plinth Project and its showcase of contemporary British sculpture has stimulated national debate. Richard Wilson's thrilling *Turning the Place Over*, commissioned by the Liverpool Biennial, became, in the words of Sir Nicholas Serota, 'one of the best pieces of public art in Europe'.¹⁰⁴

All these institutions are part publicly funded. Yet they are all also independent of the constraints of regular public art policy. They have become



too strong for the Arts Council or local authorities and have broken free of instrumentalism. They are beyond the reach of the public art officers, the bureaucrats, arts administrators and developers. And with this autonomy they have developed unimpeachable artistic credentials, with strongly independent directors. The foundations of good public art practice lie here.

Postscript: Maintenance

No other element of the public art industry better demonstrates the need for an overhaul of the system than the issue of maintenance. Public art is more plentiful, more amorphous in form and more challenging in construction than ever before. Yet no council I contacted had a formal framework or funds for maintenance.

The public art officer for Barking and Dagenham told me upkeep was 'a difficult area' and that they 'try to commission work that requires no upkeep', adding that 'budgets don't allow for maintenance'. In Bristol, the policy seems to be to leave the maintenance to those who have commissioned the

work; apparently the pieces are 'designed so that they're low maintenance'. In Hastings, the mention of upkeep was met with the statement: 'Always a problem.' Every brief has a clause stating that maintenance will not be provided for. Dundee had a similar attitude. There the public art officer declared that 'the costs of maintenance of works are huge' and they 'don't have the money for it'.


This appears to be the rule for the majority of councils. And it has resulted in millions of pounds of waste. Some sculptures have been left to deteriorate beyond repair; some have become health hazards, and litigation is not uncommon. Where cases remain unresolved, the pieces are either put into storage or dismantled.

One of the most high-profile instances of demolition was Thomas Heatherwick's £1.5 million sculpture *B of the Bang*. A rush by local regeneration agencies and the city council to replicate the *Angel of the North* effect in the wake of the Manchester Commonwealth Games resulted in poor planning, overrun and spiralling costs. Delivery was delayed by a year and a half. Costs were underestimated by £750,000. Within two weeks of its unveiling, the monument began to fall apart, its heavy spikes breaking off the main structure. The council had to close a road and divert the public, and it initiated proceedings to recover the money. The court found in the council's favour and ordered the Heatherwick Studio to pay £1.7 million. In 2009 the sculpture was dismantled.

Maintenance issues have also plagued Heatherwick's other celebrated installation, the *Blue Carpet* (Newcastle). During the commissioning, selection and installation process, the council consulted the public and local businesses and hired arts experts. Costs ballooned (from £300,000 to £1.2 million) and installation was delayed. In all, from start to finish, the process took eight years. When the work was finally unveiled, in 2002, there was some consternation that the *Blue Carpet* did not look very blue. Heatherwick insisted that it was 'blue enough

to last 100 years without fading'. Today it is a bog-standard grey, having enduring a daily crush of tyres that rubbed out the colour completely, before it was made into a pedestrian zone.

These mishaps of maintenance and design are not confined to the Heatherwick Studio. Every town and city has examples of public art in various states of deterioration. The reason? Cost. Even the sums required to care for smaller pieces can be beyond the capability of most councils. We can get some sense of what is involved from a 2008 Manchester City Council report on maintenance. The upkeep of the city's 384 war memorials, civic statues and public art was to cost £172,080 for 2008/09, £127,120 for 2009/10 and £127,210 for 2010/11.¹⁰⁵ These sums included 'cleaning, pointing, coatings, vegetation management and drainage improvements' and 'salary costs and fees'.¹⁰⁶ Westminster Council, meanwhile, offers a specific sum for the thirty-three-year upkeep of a bronze: 'At 2008 prices, the minimum cost for the future maintenance of a simple bronze life size figure would be in the region of £40,000.'¹⁰⁷

From these figures, one can deduce that the average annual cost of maintenance of the average civic monument or piece of public art would range from £300 to £1,200. Most major cities have upwards of 300 sculptures. To maintain these works of art would require anything from £90,000 to £360,000 per year. On this issue alone the current mania for public art is unsustainable. 

4

Lessons from History

The public art of previous generations offers a cautionary tale. It should restrain us from imagining that it is ever easy to achieve consensus over public art. Disputes over civic statuary are nothing new: they have been there from the start. Weak, empty, anodyne public art is not a uniquely modern misfortune. Every era can claim its fair share. There has always been good public art. There has always been bad public art. There has always been argument, rancour and nimbyism. None of this is new.

What is new is our aesthetic uncertainty. And that uncertainty – that inability (or unwillingness) to make aesthetic judgements – has undoubtedly helped the spread of mediocrity in public art. It has also helped the spread of instrumentalism. As one art historian noted, ‘Lack of consensus over quality ... strengthens the call for justification.’¹⁰⁸ In the past, our artistic vision was more focused. Good taste and good quality were easier to discern. Most debate and outcry would be over content, not style – over the *who* rather than the *how* of public statuary.

There was, however, plenty of criticism of memorialisation. For the eighteenth-century poet, playwright and politician Joseph Addison and the clergyman and writer James Hervey, memorials were vain and counter-productive: ‘by making public a name that would be unrecognisable’, those who commissioned these shrines

only ensured the deceased’s oblivion more completely. Nor were great deeds enhanced by a monument; on the contrary they were diminished by what James Hervey called ‘these ostentatious Methods, of BRIBING the VOTE of Fame, and purchasing a little posthumous Renown!’¹⁰⁹

Even at the height of the craze for memorials in the early twentieth century, critics could be found. Augustine Birrell MP delivered his broadside while unveiling a new memorial in Glasgow:

Statues are often doubtful joys, and some day orators might be employed to go about the country, not unveiling but veiling old statues, and delivering speeches not in appreciation but in depreciation of their subject, and showing cause why their effigies should no longer be allowed to thrust themselves upon public attention.¹¹⁰

History also offers us alternative models of public participation. For the fragile city autocrats of the sixteenth century, public art was a means of controlling and seducing. Elaborate fountains, civic statues and grand mythical sculpture acted both as self-consciously munificent gifts and as forces for civilisation:

It was felt in particular that if the poor could be persuaded to take an interest in high art it would help them to transcend their material limitations, reconciling them to their lot, and rendering them less likely to covet or purloin or agitate for a share in the possessions of their superiors. Social tranquillity would thus be ensured.¹¹¹

The autocratic model of public art commissioning has been much mimicked. When power has come with taste and benevolence, it has proved a benign enough system. Many of Britain’s new towns owe their fine crop of statuary to such a model – to aesthete master planners. However, this model is always open to abuse.

We have more to learn from the nineteenth-century model of public art provision. That century’s ‘statuemanía’ sprang almost exclusively from the public itself. The process followed a set pattern: any group that was keen on erecting a memorial would petition the mayor to call a public meeting, at which a vote would be taken on convening a memorial committee. These committees could balloon to over a hundred members, but an executive committee

would choose the artist and supervise every aspect of the creation.¹¹²

Donations would come in from all and sundry. In acknowledgement of the fact that too much money from a single source might pave the way for manipulation, the committee would often set an upper limit on donations. A proposed extension of this upper limit in Liverpool from five guineas to ten was denounced by the *Liverpool Courier*, which said it ‘would deter working class contributions’.¹¹³ Social benefit in public statuary was to be had not from manipulating the artwork’s message or mode of creation, but from encouraging the sharing of resources.

Public attachment was further fostered through inauguration ceremonies:

[They] tended to be among the most spectacular events of the entire year, with attendances frequently requiring the sort of crowd control measures that would not be out of place in a rock concert today ... With the almost military precision of their timetables, their trade processions, their surging crowds of flag-waving onlookers and their occasional outbreaks of public disorder, these were a vital part of the culture of mass entertainment in the 19th century.¹¹⁴

Artistic independence and public ownership were clearly in healthy equilibrium in the nineteenth century.

By the 1950s, a socialist ideology had gripped arts policy. The explicitly civilising public art schemes of the postwar years are the ancestors of today’s instrumentalist policy. The sculpture parks of this era were delivered not on artistic grounds, but on the grounds that free and communal creativity could fight it out against a commercial culture that was seen by the socialist cause as embedding passive and individualistic ideals.¹¹⁵

Some of these schemes, however, had an

admirable system of commissioning. The groundbreaking sculpture festival in Battersea Park in 1948 succeeded because an independent arts panel was in control, and not the politicians and bureaucrats at the London County Council (LCC). When the LCC took up the idea of commissioning public art for its new schools and housing estates, it set up an advisory committee in 1957, consisting of Lord Cottesloe, Henry Moore, the LCC architect Leslie Martin, the painter William Coldstream and director of the Arts Council, Philip James. They drew up a list of recommended artists, from which the LCC could choose.¹¹⁶

The principle of arts advisory boards recommends itself from abroad, too. In France, all artworks commissioned for the public space have to be submitted to a national body – the Commission consultative de la commande publique – or a regional subsidiary. The Commission’s requirement that two artists, two curators and an architect are included on the board ensures that all public art is essentially peer reviewed. Art is thus prioritised over politics. Similarly, reading the mission statement of the Centre national des arts plastiques (CNAP) (which is France’s visual arts equivalent of the Arts Council and has been in existence, in one form or another, since 1791) one notices a healthy focus on art and excellence, and a distinct lack of interest in instrumentalism.¹¹⁷

We in Britain have rarely gone in for quality control from on high. Here parochial, pragmatic or empirical needs have always trumped the artistic imperative. In the nineteenth century, we tied public sculpture to civic pride. In the early twentieth, we turned it to acts of remembrance. In the 1950s we shifted the emphasis to the civilising impulse. Throughout, however, the artistic spirit just about remained independent. The way in which public policy has swamped public art practice over the past twenty years has put paid to this. ☞

5

Conclusion


The best art is that which triumphs as art. Any art that attempts to triumph on any other grounds – political, economic or social – is likely to fail. And that is why so much of today’s contemporary art does fail. For everything to do with the process by which public art is commissioned is determined by these extra-artistic aims. Councils have written extra-artistic goals into their planning documents; the Arts Council has them as its guiding principles. Two of the largest commissioners of public art – regeneration quangos and private developers – deliver public art with the explicit goal of economic gain.

Yet, as this report shows, there is no good evidence to suggest that public art can fulfil any of these extra-artistic objectives. Erecting a statue does not necessarily increase land value. Installations do not lead to higher employment or greater GDP. Communities are not necessarily brought closer together – in fact, nothing does more to damage the body politic than the spending of taxes on these unsolicited and frequently unloved gifts. Not even the much-vaunted idea that public art is a route to healthy recovery is founded in fact.

None of this has worried the Arts Council and its apparatchiks. Such unfounded claims now drive public arts policy and have resulted in a wholesale transformation of our cities, and increasingly also of our countryside. The organisations that have not bowed to the pressures of public policy are those that have established their credibility through their artistic independence. Artangel, the Fourth Plinth Project and the Liverpool Biennial have delivered some of the best public art by ensuring an arm’s-length policy when it comes to public funding.

The past six decades have neglected the primary audience for public art, and little of it has been undertaken with the express consent of the public. It has been done *for* them and *in their name*, but rarely as a result of a genuine public desire – a strange state of affairs. For public statuary began in this country with public engagement at its core. That the public

art industry has largely overlooked several twenty-first-century forms of public subscription – all of which would be perfectly adaptable to public art commissioning – demonstrates how public subsidy can often retard progress, rather than encourage it.

Statuemanía must be calmed. We live in a world saturated by images. Commerce has encouraged a wealth of visual culture to rise up all around us. This – the billboards, the buildings, etc. – has been a much greater influence on contemporary art than any of the tired outdoor public sculpture of the past fifty years. Cutting back on public art, then, does not mean cutting back on visual culture: it means returning the public realm to a freer, more diverse and more nourishing visual ecosystem, and liberating it from the shackles of government policy. Public art should return to the guerrilla activities of its site-specific and street-art roots and be left to fight it out openly and honestly with the visual culture already around us. 

6

Recommendations

1. Art for art’s sake

Public, critical and artistic respect for public art is at an all-time low. To regain respect, public art needs to regain its artistic integrity. In order to regain artistic integrity, it must disentangle itself from its extra-artistic pursuits and instrumentalist goals, and remove itself as far as it can from local government bureaucracy, state sponsorship and the commercial concerns of developers.

Economic, political and social objectives should not drive public art provision: artistic goals should. The best way to ensure that this happens is to dismantle the state-funded public art advocacy lobby. The Arts Council should cease regular funding of commissioning agencies, arts consultancies and advocacy bodies. It should stop handing out grants to individual public art projects. Local authorities should cease employing public art officers and scrap public art strategies. Public art should no longer take centre stage in regeneration projects.

The benefits of readjusting the public art industry in this way would be manifold. Without socio-economic backing, the public art sector would be smaller. The smaller the sector, the less of a burden public art would be on the public purse. The less of a fiscal (and visual) burden public art is, the less need there will be to indulge in the evaluation game. Public artists could then get on with the business of making art, rather than jumping through statistical hoops.

2. Consent not coercion

‘Per cent for art’ schemes are fundamentally unfair and self-defeating. They foist public art on developments that might not need it and on architects who might not want it. Relationships between developers and local authorities are damaged by it. Artistic corners are cut. ‘Per cent for art’ has been to blame for some of the very worst examples of public art: unthinking standalones and street tchotchkes. Developers and architects should be free to choose whether they want public art in their developments;

they should never be coerced.

It is absurd that councils have, up to now, had the ability to veto a development if the developer is against commissioning public art. A new planning bill is now going through parliament. The government should take the opportunity to amend the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 to specifically forbid the use of Section 106 obligations, which force developers to provide public art.

3. Quality not quantity

The past two decades of public art provision have been too much about quantity and not enough about quality. Not only has this encouraged a conveyor-belt approach to art (with artists reproducing works without thought) and forced authorities to seek out cheaper, less eminent artists (in a practice where artistic maturity is vital), but it has also led to a situation where local authorities cannot keep up with the maintenance costs of those sculptures already on their books. The sums involved are not something that even Britain’s major cities can afford or accept – not even in a favourable climate.

Scrapping the ‘per cent for art’ obligation would see the volume of public art produced decrease substantially. As would ending direct funding of public art projects, public art commissioning agencies and public art officers. For public art to regain its artistic integrity and quality, we need to provide the more independent-minded arts festivals and those curators who have a proven track record on public art with more money, greater scope and a freer hand. We also need to establish a body to oversee quality in a more formal way.

The RFAC and its successor bodies (CABE and now Design Council Cabe) are a useful model. Their organisational set-up, their expertise and their independence were and are admirable. And it was on the back of this reputation that their advice persuaded many developers to adapt plans. However, all three lacked teeth. About a third of the RFAC’s recommendations went unheeded.

We propose a National Public Art Commission (NPAC). Like RFAC, it would review and guide Britain's public art; but, crucially, it would also have the power to prevent a piece of art from being installed in the public realm. Any scheme over £50,000 would be referred to the body. As with RFAC and CABE, it would be formed of a panel of experts, including gallerists, curators, critics and artists, who would receive no salary, but would have a team of salaried supporting staff. This could be funded from the money saved in the recommended axing of ACE-funded consultants and commissioning agencies.

The new Commission would maintain its material and intellectual independence by following the non-departmental public body rules by which national museums are run. Any projects costing under £50,000 could be inspected by regional experts: by the heads of the Cass Foundation in the East, the Arnolfini Gallery in the South West, the Yorkshire Sculpture Park in the North East, etc.

4. Of the people, by the people, for the people

If public art is going to continue to be created in the public name and to use public funds, the public has to become part of the process. No longer can it be ignored; no longer can it be dictated to from above; no longer can it be patronised or second-guessed. Public art should stop being imposed on the public and should start to spring from the public.

One of the best ways of encouraging this is to harness the power of a twenty-first-century version of public subscription: 'crowd funding'. Crowd funding pools small donations from a large audience via the internet. It is increasingly being used by arts organisations that are new (and therefore cannot get their hands on funds through conventional channels) or niche (and need to reach out to a wider catchment).

All ideas that originate from the public would first be reviewed and then sanctioned by the

National Public Art Commission. Sums would then be raised through public subscriptions or crowd funding. If the total required is not reached, the difference would be made up by the Arts Council. That way artistic quality would be secured, as would the public link. Commissions from local authorities would also be required to receive a portion of their costs through crowd funding.


This would challenge the idea that the public should be dismissed on issues of taste. Random amateurs should not be entrusted with the creation of the art itself, any more than random amateurs should be allowed to conduct heart surgery; but, with expert guidance, the public can be called upon to make valuable decisions.

5. Encouraging dissent

Much great public art is created by deliberately not toeing the line. There must be space for public art to flourish outside established frameworks. The healthy independent art organisations should be tasked with preserving this site-specific and street-art activity, which might well fly in the face of established and public taste. This art should be allowed to escape the constraints of the NPAC and to flex its counter-cultural muscles as it wishes.

6. Decommissioning

All these recommendations would help to control aesthetic standards for the future. But there should also be a way for us to make alterations to what is already there. We propose a process by which the public can trigger the decommissioning of pieces of public art that have failed. First, those who wish to see an artwork decommissioned would have to draw up a petition. If it received enough support, it would trigger a public meeting. Here there would be a debate, involving experts and 'devil's advocates', if necessary, and a vote on whether the artwork should be dismantled. The only caveat would be that all artwork would have to be over a decade old. As we saw from the Angel of the North, public

views need time to settle. Once a decision has been made by the community, there could be the sort of communal celebration in demolition that used to accompany the installation of public memorials in the nineteenth century. 

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