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# Sacrificial Materials

## Art and Public Space

....Research Topics and Speculation about Art and Public Space by Scottish Citizen and artist Matt Baker

Monday, 22 November 2010

### A serious attempt to unravel public art (deep breath)

When I make an artwork I often talk about the importance of having a 'door' in the work ie something which will have a connection to (or be recognisable by) a **general** public. Choosing to 'enter' that door offers the audience the opportunity to delve deeper into the themes of the work....but what is of paramount importance to me is that the presence of the 'door' issues an invitation – in other words people feel included rather than excluded . I would consider a work to be a failure if people were to feel that they were denied access because the work exuded a coded message of artworld exclusivity.

I set out to make the *Sacrificial Materials Blog* a place with the same ethos...however, please accept my apologies – I need to unpack some thoughts that have been fermenting for a while. I want to look a bit deeper at the idea of audience and intention within public art.....it could well get a bit geeky as I try to unpick some of the paradoxes, jargon and vested interests within this strange world.....apologies I hope there might be a doorway and some light by the end.

I have lost count of the conferences, seminars and symposia that I have attended which have identified the 'problem' with public art as being the term 'public art' itself. The artworld is a strange place if it were a person it would what Scots call a nippy sweetie ie someone who is sweetness and light to your face and then vicious when your back is turned. There is an laudable code amongst artists that everyone has the absolute right to make the art that they want to make – but this code is what paralyses useful discussion at public art gatherings – as long as we make no differentiation between different forms of practice in public space then key terms of critical reference will remain impossible to define. My contention is that a critical forum is vital to the long-term development and vitality of any practice and currently it is lacking in the kind of public art that I choose to practice

The lines that I am currently thinking along suggest 3 distinct strands of practice in public<sup>[1]</sup>. Here the earlier analogy of the **door** becomes useful again. Please note that what I am talking about here is the *intent* behind the work ie that any categorisation would be begin with what artist/commissioner *set out to do* rather than begin from the 'visible' product of their endeavours.

### Category 1 – All Door (and nothing beyond the door)

#### Artist Website

<http://www.mattbaker.org.uk>

#### #ButterflyRevolution



small positive actions for a better world - led from scotland

#### Arist-led projects I am involved with

- IOTA
- The Stove
- Glorious Govan
- NothingAboutUs
- Water Row Action Group

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- EAFS (2)



'Eric' statue - Morecambe, Lancashire, UK

The type of work that is effectively 'urban entertainment or decoration' eg Eric Morecambe statue (Morecambe) or Desperate Dan (Dundee). Problematically - this is the kind of work that the general public typically expect to see under the label –public art. I do not propose discussing this area of practice much further...generally those that are involved in it's production have no illusion that they are involved in a contemporary art debate. Absolutely, there is a place for this kind of work – but for the purposes of this discussion it is important to make a distinction between 'All Door' work and work in public space that aims to engage an audience in **more** than a 'one liner of recognition' or a 'pleasing aesthetic sensation of colour or texture).

## Category 2 – Door with something behind



'Cabot Circus Cantata' Neville Gable was artist in residence to a major retail development in Bristol for 3 years




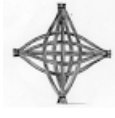






This would be the kind of work that is made **for** a public situation or context **and** is developed with a belief in, and understanding of the potential of contemporary art practice to become part of the real and active momentum of that context or place.

- National Art Conversation (1)

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-  a breathing place
-  Round 1: Pressed Pants an a Hair Shirt
-  A citizens, a citizen for a' that
-  Inverness Recognised
-  The Commonty, Anonymity and being At Home
-  'we don't rot we shrivel'
-  Artists Gathering 2011- Dumfries and Galloway

### Category 3 – No Door just lots of ‘behind’



'How Not to Cookbook' Aleksandra Mir - Collective Gallery, Edinburgh

Work that is primarily conceived for ‘artworld’ consumption but has a ‘public’ element. Typically this would be a project undertaken through the agency of a gallery that involves working, in part, outwith the gallery eg gathering a public response to a proposition or inviting the public to partake in a staged meal. The primary aim in such projects is to *use* the public context as part of the *artwork* rather than to conceive the artwork *for* the public context. <sup>[ii]</sup>

What I am **NOT** trying to do is make any form of value judgement about the different types of practice above.....I believe that each has an absolute right to exist and a valuable place in the world. Rather, what I am seeking to do is establish a different quality of *intent* that is inherent in each typology ie what the artist/agency *set out to do*. I believe that if we can agree that the intent is different, then that intent becomes a crucial foundation of critical discussion about any project or work. In the field of ‘public art’ (or what I describe above as Door with something behind) I believe that practice is suffering from the lack of a proper critical forum because there is no lingua franca ie so many bases need to be covered in framing the terms of reference of “Public Art’ that any useful debate becomes lost in the fog of generality.

#### Twitter

Tweets by @\_mattbaker

#### Blog List

##### The Long Now Blog

The Equation of Time Cam:  
Keeping Good Time for 10,000  
Years

##### Friends of the Pleistocene

This is Where We Are, Tipped  
Towards 002019

##### SHEDS

The last post

##### sans façon

New Sans façon website

##### The Commonty

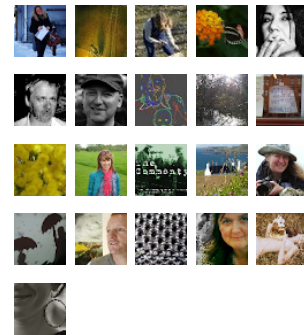
Annual General Meeting - Take  
1

##### High Airyolland Farm

##### TheStove

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Watershed+ (Calgary and its Water) Sans façon - lead artists

I was recently given the following definition of public art by Lucy Lippard (thanks Mike McCallum)

*'My own short definition of public art: accessible art of any species that cares about, challenges, involves and consults the audience for or with whom it is made, respecting community and environment. The other stuff-most of what fuels public controversy and the mass media's rhetoric on public art is still private art; no matter how big and exposed and intrusive or hyped it may be. Permanent or ephemeral, object and performance, preferably interdisciplinary, democratic, sometimes functional or didactic, a public art exists in the hearts, minds, ideologies and education of its audience as well in their physical, sensuous experience.'*

I find this a wonderfully clear and visceral statement of what is different about public art – but there is still a problem in usage of the terms ‘private’ and ‘audience’ when referring to a ‘non’ public art. A problem in as much as surely the audience for gallery art is a ‘public’ too?

By contrast the Scottish Arts Council's<sup>[iii]</sup> definition of public art could not be more stark in the way that it does not even seem to have the slightest self-awareness of its contribution to the choking fog of generality that I feel is preventing public art (particularly in Scotland) becoming the best it possibly could be:

*'We regard public art as creative activity that takes place or is situated in a public space that is not a traditional art space (for example, not a gallery or theatre etc).'*

I have even heard this stated more simply as ‘anything that does not happen in a gallery’

The hidden meta-narrative here is the primacy of the ‘artist’ – according to the Scottish Arts Council, artists ‘traditionally’ work in Galleries<sup>[iv]</sup> - and when they



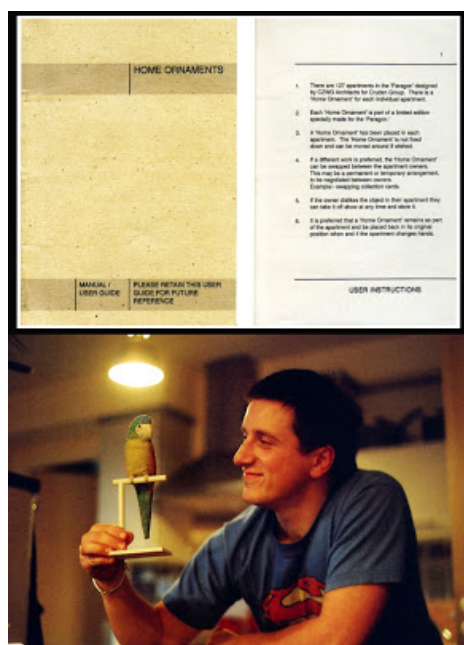
venture out of galleries they make something different – they make ‘public’ art. This is nonsense – in most cases they make the same thing ie ‘art for a gallery audience’. The difference comes when the artist **becomes** something different – a public artist. The public artist makes the kind of work described by Lucy Lippard above.

Being charitable, I would surmise that the Scottish Arts Council’s definition is based on their willingness to support gallery initiatives that ‘extend the audience’ for visual art by venturing into ‘non-traditional spaces’. Whilst this is laudable – by lumping this type of practice together with art made by public artists, the problem of critical reference points within the field is exacerbated.

This failure to grasp the nettle, by Scottish Arts Council, is disastrous for the public artist. By refusing to distinguish between the public artist and the artist who sometimes shows work in ‘non traditional spaces’ the key agency for visual art in the country is perpetuating the old myth about the primacy of ‘pure’ studio practice (the kind that makes work shown in galleries) and condemns the practice of the public artist as the kind of work that ‘real artists’ have to do occasionally to pay the bills.

There are artists (I am one) who view the gallery not as the ‘holy grail’ but rather as only one of an infinite number of possible contexts *for* which to make our work. The use of the word *for* is crucial – this is fundamentally about making work that regards the context/situation as paramount and carries a responsibility towards that situation<sup>[v]</sup>

I enjoy galleries and have had some of the most fundamentally spiritual experiences of my life with art in galleries – but I can say the same of music. film literature and even fishing – but as with these others, galleries and ‘artworld art’ are not my primary fields of operation.



'Home Ornaments' Daphne Wright- new housing Gorbals, Glasgow

I would argue that a radical split in artists began around such diverse trajectories as the later practice of Joseph Beuys, the theoretical position of the Situationists, the Green movement and Punk rock. This is the line of descent that has bred the contemporary public artist – whose primary concern is not ‘art making’ but rather to use art practice as an ‘openspace’ within which can coexist insight, creativity and connectivity with other disciplines and movements all connected with a specific context (and through integrity in that specificity a connection to the larger movement of ideas).

It is the *intent* of the public artist to get involved at first hand with place and people that differs radically from another artist who *places* their work in public or *uses* the public as a form of additional ‘medium’ in their work. It is this intent that I believe offers the key to an effective critical forum and developmental strategy for public art – to look first at what the artist intended and their means of acting on that intent – rather than to start with the art ‘product’ and work backwards from the ‘effect’ of the product.



'7000 Oaks' Joseph Beuys

I believe that we need to be brave and stake out the territory for public art as something that stands apart from ‘urban decoration’ at one extreme and ‘gallery art outside the gallery’ at the other. Only then will we create the conditions for a useful and productive critical language.

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[1] When I was developing this terms of this discussion I had a chat with old friends and outstanding public artists *Sans façon* – while they stopped short of trying to

make a critical distinction between different areas of practice they recognised the 3 categories that I describe – but they refer to them as ‘all public and no art (but maybe a bit of craft)’, ‘public art’ and ‘all art and no real public’

[ii] Of course, it can be argued that all art is conceived for the ultimate benefit of humankind...however, the point I am making is that this necessarily abstract notion of affecting consciousness through aesthetic appreciation and critical debate is different from the aim of using art to directly engage with and have an effect on an actual context.

[iii] The Scottish Arts Council merged with Scottish Screen at the beginning of 2010 to become Creative Scotland – the new organisation has not, as yet, published an update of the old SAC definition of Public Art.

[iv] my discussion here is primarily about visual art rather than the performing arts

[v] NB – taking a stance critical of a context can be equally valid in this regard...this is not about ‘doing good’ in the patronising sense but in the holistic creative sense of fully engaging with place and people as an artist.

Posted by [\\_mattbaker](#) at [23:12](#)



Labels: [research](#)

#### 7 comments:

**Anonymous** 23 November 2010 at 02:34

Nice one. I had similar discussions a few years back with the Tate and other galleries about their term "off-site" - as if art which didn't fit the traditional 4 wall gallery model was somehow deviant.

Reply



**Neale** 23 November 2010 at 18:19

Matt

I completely got what you were saying here. (I think)

New Luce, for instance, got a bit of bespoke art that tried to capture the spirit of the place. Rather than a bit of art that tried to captivate our spirit.

Or am I wrong here?

Reply



**\_mattbaker** 23 November 2010 at 20:39

Hi Neale

The fact that we met through a public art project and are continuing that discussion here is one of the things that makes public art worthwhile in my view - we should definitely carry the chat further over a dram sometime!

Those interested in contemporary rural life should check out the Airyolland Blog (see list on right)

Your summing up of the aims of the artwork project for New Luce (those unsure of what we are talking about see labelled posts on this blog) are spot on...I hope.

The fundamental character of my approach to the project was to work with the village to make a piece of work that was FOR the village ie NOT drop something in the village that I had been working on before and then get lots of photos in swanky art magazines of MY art in YOUR village.

Something you said in your kitchen was really formative in the way the project turned out - when you talked about the declining numbers of human 'breeding pairs' in New Luce, it made connections in my head about the day to day normality of conception and birth in farming folk and also about the reality that the continuing existence of the village was not a 'given' but, rather, like the stock on a farm it requires 'husbandry' and good luck. This was one of the 'paths' that started me thinking about the joining of the two rivers as symbolic of the 'fertility' of the place....and tried to use the sculptures as totems of that creative act of joining; an act that I saw as essential to the character of the place. It is a very old fashioned role for art as some form of invocation to the forces of nature - but one that I hope will prove to have some resonance for New Luce. On a very practical level I hoped that by drawing people to one of the most forgotten but romantic spots in the village - some kind of result might ensue!

Matt

Reply



**Ruth** 26 November 2010 at 13:44

Hi Matt,

Thanks so much for sending me the link to this. I suspect that it may have been me you were thinking of (and generously not naming) when you say:

"I have even heard this stated more simply as 'anything that does not happen in a gallery'"

Touché, if so – though I would like to expand

Firstly, I usually try say that we can talk about public art as being anything that is not contextualised by a gallery. This is not quite the same as anything that's not in a gallery – as contexts aren't always physical, after all. We can think about a theoretical context, as well as the context of association or framing that encompasses the signage or interpretive strategies of galleries' off site projects. So hopefully there's a little more nuance there than a simple inside/outside binary.

Secondly, Yes. This is absolutely a brutal and blunt definition. And that's deliberate on my part. I like to have a bit of friction in my life. The phrase 'public art' is awkward and irritating. It's impossible to define, but it's also a shorthand. We can use it to outline a vague and problematic territory, quickly.

Is this useful? Yes, I think so - sometimes. If I use words like 'relational practice' or 'site-sensitive installation' people outside the art-world have no idea what I mean. If I say 'public art' people may have a narrower idea of what I mean than is actually the case, but it does give us a place to start from as we begin to talk.

Contentious? Certainly, but I'm all for a bit of contention. I think we're lucky in a way to have been stuck with such a lame moniker, which nobody likes. I know of no-one in the field who's happy with the phrase 'public art' and for that reason we don't ever take it for granted as a definition. We do not respect it and so we are not bound by it.

I think we have to keep challenging our terms, in exactly the way you're doing here, Matt. We have to keep interrogating languages as well as practices, and we have to keep asking the difficult questions. But at the back of my mind I still have a sneaky suspicion that the moment at which we become satisfied with our answers is the moment when we stop making art, so let's make sure that that satisfaction is a long way off. Long live the friction!



Best,  
Ruth.

Reply



**\_mattbaker** 27 November 2010 at 22:38

Hi Ruth - great stuff! This is exactly the debate we should be all be having, I think.

Just for the record - I wasn't quoting you (or anyone in particular) about the definition...it is just something I have heard said a few times.

I agree with most of what you say - particularly about the need for 'a friction' that keeps us all making work.

What I still fail to understand is why, if we must define public art as being different from something else why 'gallery' must be the 'other'? What is it about a gallery context that is so different...is it not public too? If not, what is it?

I was trying out a position that "public art is work made by 'public artists' as opposed to 'gallery artists'". I am characterising the public artist as making work that is primarily 'for' or 'about' or 'with' a place and a public that is not primarily a 'artworld' public and has a primary purpose of being demonstrably active and effective within its context.

A 'gallery artist' I see as one making work in a gallery (or outside it) that is primarily directed to have an impact on an 'artworld' audience - ie to have an effect within the critical, historical and theoretical realms of Fine Art.

Of course my stated aim of building a foundation for defining public art in such a way that a critical dialogue can be built around it, may be ultimately self-defeating. Public artists might start to make work for that critical context! So maybe you are right that it is better to be working within 'unsatisfactory' terms of reference, because then at least we have nothing to think about bar the work!

Oh dear... I just find it so disappointing that that work which I am interested in never seems to get discussed in the media in any kind of informed way.

Reply



**change** 3 December 2010 at 13:43

Awesome stuff Matt. I'm with Ruth about having a bit of friction, and so here's my fractious 2 cents.

A key distinction (response) I think to be made is whether or not we want to be specific with our definitions of public art and allow the control/critique to come from those definitions (ie, a clearer definition by Arts Councils)

Or if we want to leave a void where anything that can happen and the critique/controls comes from other artists/groups who are also involved in the making/designing of other similar projects

Both paths have their strengths but would argue their weaknesses to – if we rely on the former, we risk being didactic, and if we rely on the latter, often we're too late to do anything about it, since the "public art" would have already been constructed and birthed. At that stage, we could not (even if we wanted to) through out the bathwater, despite how ugly the baby was.

So we're in a bit of a pickle between a mixed metaphor and a rock. Do we navigate policy or merely suggest guidance? I would argue, however, in Scotland, we're on the right path for public art. And this is important to acknowledge. These discussions are exactly what is needed and these thoughts

are encouraging – perhaps the disseminating voices (such as yours!) should be exactly that: disseminating. And we should continually argue with each other and against the policy makers because it is within those frictions that we find the most interesting things.

This is the political navigation that I would argue is healthy and beneficial to all parties: one the condition voices are equally respected, obviously. (Perhaps this is where we need to all work harder...) What we need to do next is where we always fail: we need to do something about it! Action! Revolution! Etc etc etc blah blah blah. I think the more examples and diversity of approaches are visible, the more comfortable both “gallery based” and “public artists” would feel (-though - what about those that work with both contexts??!) Perhaps it would confuse things more, but I’ve always found a bit of confusion makes life more interesting.

Reply



**\_mattbaker** 7 December 2010 at 15:27

Hi Change - this is great, just the ideal bit of momentum needed I think.

It feels so long since I really engaged the discursive side of my brain...long ago I decided to keep quiet, get on with my work, and let the critics et al do the talking.

(BTW> If the net result of any of this chat would be for the Arts Council to re-write its definition of public art then I think I would renew my vow of silence permanently! I believe one of the sole functions of the Arts Council is for us to complain about)

I like your vision of a Scottish scene that is constantly re-negotiating terms of reference and its contract with a public. I'm well up for drinking those drams and manning those barricades. Perversely (considering the subject), I think our challenge is how we manifest such debates in public.....maybe I am too much of a hurry, but I want the 'friction' to be visible beyond a back room.

I guess that my aim in writing the original post was to try and establish some territory for discussion in the outlets that are currently available eg PAR+RS. But I realise that PAR+RS has a mandate (from SAC) to cover a full range of 'practice in public' - hence part of my logic in questioning those definitions...

It is all fine that everyone is making their voices heard around the place - but how do we do our best to ensure that other revolutionaries are able to hear?

My New Years resolution is to really prioritise going to every possible public artwork event (except conferences-unless they are artworks) that I can...no more 'too busy' excuses - please let me know if/when you have something on

all best

matt

Reply

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