

PANGAEA SCULPTORS' CENTRE

— Sculpting
Practice
Catching a
Train on
the Move,
London
2015 —

Marsha Bradfield
Lucy Tomlins

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Public Sculpture, Public Art

Because what follows concerns public commissions, it's important to preface this by acknowledging the many and varied artists who are self-initiating and self-funding projects to explore public space. These practitioners take seriously their responsibility as members of the public to use and benefit from the public realm. From Lottie Child's *Street Training*, which is prompting greater awareness about how we engage our surroundings;¹ to Critical Practice's *#TransActing: A Market of Values*, which brought together some 64 projects to explore non-financial value production on the Rootstein Hopkins Parade Ground,² artists are critically and creatively exercising the public realm in a myriad ways and to a greater or lesser extent of fanfare. Central to this practice is the worry that if you don't use it, you may lose; it's often only through activating public space that we grasp both its potential and, crucially, the limitations thereof.

Many of these artist-initiatives, however, are relatively low in their visibility, one-offs or fleeting gestures and performances by individuals. But most of London's public sculptures and public artworks that are making the headlines and lodging in the wider social conscience point to the growth in both temporary and permanent art interventions as placemaking for cultural regeneration. Public art curation/production agencies and placemaking agencies are on the rise. They are proving vital in facilitating substantial investment in public art commissions and programming across the capital that is increasingly funded by the property developers, who through redevelopment and gentrification campaigns, are shaping our city and our lives in profound ways.

Consider, for example, Alex Chinneck's *A Bullet from a Shooting Star*. PSC's autumn programme included a site visit to this ambitious sculpture, which is located on the Greenwich Peninsula, against the backdrop of Canary Wharf. Commissioned by London Design Festival in collaboration with Knight Dragon, the Hong Kong-based property developer, *Bullet* - which is as much design as it is art - landed with a champagne-fuelled bang on a site where Knight Dragon is currently developing a new district for London with 15,000 new homes.³

1. For more information visit www.streettraining.org.
2. For more information visit www.criticalpractice.org.
3. For more information visit www.alexchinneck.com.

Something striking about projects like this one are their catalytic functions. They create platforms, occasions and opportunities for things to happen that outstrip a phenomenological encounter with the sculpture. These artworks may be tools to activate a space in a particular way or to encourage a change in how it is perceived and used. Unsurprisingly, big-name artists from big-name galleries most often author these big-budget, bold-statement projects. It's a potent cocktail for success and hence appealing to largely risk-averse commissioners who want guaranteed quality and deliverability, whilst maximising the bang for their buck in terms of publicity for these very public works and the property developers who fund them. This makes for a good story in the press and many public artworks photograph well. As artist Conall McAteer pointed out in our recent symposium, *The State of Sculpture*, 'The commissioning process can lead to ... increasingly this shiny mirrored surface that you see everywhere. This sought out concept of public interaction, on a base level, could be defined by someone seeing themselves in the reflective surface and taking a picture of it. Posting it on their Twitter or Instagram, just because it makes for a nice photograph. It's become familiar, but whether that makes for good work, I'm not so sure.'⁴ Selfie with sculpture, anyone?

It is hard to overestimate the role that property developers play in the economies and ecologies of London's artworlds. In 2014, the GLA released a report that estimates that as many as 30% of artists will lose their places of work in five years.⁵ Add to this the loss of project spaces, production spaces and others occupied by artists and arts organisations - coupled with the redevelopment of low-cost housing, effectively pushing these low earners further out of London where they can afford rents and we begin to grasp how bad things really are. Many property developers would argue, however, that this boom is actually creating opportunities for artists and arts

4. Conall McAteer, comment made at Public Sculpture: From Process to Place, Shortwave Cinema, London, 28 September 2015. For more information visit www.pangaeasculptorscentre.com/public-sculpture-from-process-to-place.

5. Greater London Authority, *Artists' Workspace Study: Report and Recommendations - September 2014*, London: Greater London Authority, 2014, 5, available from www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/gla_caw_140911_web.pdf.

Alex Chinneck, *A Bullet from a Shooting Star*, 2015; courtesy of the studio of Alex Chinneck



What gives this sector the credentials to select the artworks 'given' to the public by being sited in public spaces? What functions do the works selected serve within the development agenda? Is creating better communities the bottom line for these commissioners or is it selling more flats? Are these things mutually exclusive?

organisations, too. Section 106 planning agreements are mechanisms designed to mitigate the impact of development by creating community resources: a library, a recycling provision, a sculpture centre. 'Development contributions' as they're often termed, typically involve investing in the culture or infrastructure of the sites they're transforming. With so much development in London, it's little wonder the property business is now a leading commissioner of art. This creates interesting and problematic situations, begging the questions: What gives this sector the credentials to select the artworks 'given' to the public by being sited in public spaces? What functions do the works selected serve within the development agenda? Is creating better communities the bottom line for these commissioners or is it selling more flats? Are these things mutually exclusive? And who's considering the art in all of this?

During the recent Frieze talk, Off-Centre: Can Artists Still Afford to Live in London?, Anna Strongman, senior projects director for Argent LLP, observed that for the developer, 'there's always a commercial driver' and 'that sometimes the dialogue is

not always as in depth or as meaningful as it could be [in the process of commissioning].⁶ This notwithstanding, there is no question that in principle, integrating cultural offers into building schemes is a good thing. In the case of sculpture, this has led to a veritable explosion of public art commissions in and around the capital. And PSC also recognises the significant, potential benefits of the GLA's and borough councils' engagement with the promises and provisions of 106 agreements, especially when this creates webs of accountability that would not otherwise be in place. Further, we could not be more supportive of initiatives that offer real opportunities for artists to develop their skills, advance their practices and earn above, or at least, a living wage.



The reality is, however, that many 106 agreements are often little more than 'commitments' to culture that never come to fruition. As such they point to 'art washing' as a growing trend. Take the Regal Homes one-off public sculpture commission on Cremer Street, Hackney, that PSC protested against in 2015.⁷ In the same breath the property developer applied to bulldoze over a hundred artists' studios, they offered a £1,000 cash prize for the production of a public artwork.⁷ It's a measly

7. Ella Jessel, 'News / 29 July, 2015, 'Artists Slam Sculpture Competition Launched by Developers,' *The Hackney Citizen*, 29 July 2015, www.hackneycitizen.co.uk/2015/07/29/cremer-street-artists-slam-regal-homes-hackney-road-sculpture-prize.

sum for a project that could take months to complete and easily incur substantial installation and maintenance costs. A modest artist fee from a not-for-profit is one thing. But from a property developer? Would Regal Homes expect their plumbers or electricians to work for such low pay? The answer is obviously, no. So why should their artist-winner do so? So much profit is being made from London's regeneration. Why isn't more trickling down to the artists who helped to create it?

These seem pressing questions when producing, installing and maintaining sculpture is such a big ask, especially when it's in public space, replete with the requirements of this realm: site specificity, safety, durability, impact, inoffensiveness and so on. The rise of public art curators/producers, such as Delcroix Pinsky, and placemaking agencies, such as Futurecity, is testament to this. They play an important role in the delivery of today's public art commissions by straddling two worlds.

On the one hand, they understand artists and the significance of process and sensibility in the ways they work. These facilitators also appreciate that artists aren't always well-versed in the business of art. This is unfortunate, a placemaker recently observed to us, as even a little knowledge pays dividends when trying to engage people, cultures and systems in the commercial sphere. While attitudes and awareness are changing as art schools and the Arts Council foster the professionalisation of practice, there are still many practitioners who haven't worked in this way before. On the other hand, placemakers are, well, well placed because they understand the language of property. They know how to negotiate with the developers and engage their agendas. Many public art curators and producers are also adroit in proposing ideas, not only to exciting potential commissioners and other patrons but doing so in ways that deliver on their business needs. Strongman, for instance, observed on behalf of Argent LLP in the Frieze talk referenced previously that, 'Working with artists and curators is a challenge, as our cultures are so incredibly different' and that, 'embracing art and culture in a way that has meaning for both sides is not easy.'⁸ Public

8. Strongman, comment made during, 'Off-Centre,' recording available from www.friezeprojects.org/talks/detail/off-centre-can-artists-still-afford-to-live-in-london.

art curators and producers also support artist-commissioner relations by facilitating contracts and other legal considerations, supporting the fabrication and installation process and encouraging fair payment for labour. In effect, through their track record, they underwrite the project's deliverability and quality. The continuity and reassurance these cultural actors provide enables them to promote more risk taking and in doing so, create something innovative—or at least that's the ideal.

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It's clear that many public artworks are commissioned today to perform certain functions above and beyond their artistic ones. These include, to a greater or lesser degree, enacting the commissioner's brand and, in the case of property developers, doing so in keeping with their vision for their site. It's true that artists who find this unsavoury will struggle to work with their client's marketing teams. Would this branding be easier to swallow if reframed as audience engagement? Impact is high on the Arts Council's agenda. While there are many problems with how this has been instrumentalised, there is much to be said for being relevant and populist, too. Culture is of growing interest to the 8.6 million who live in London⁹ and for sure, many of the 17.4 million international visitors¹⁰ annually as well. muf architecture/art make this point neatly in the following declaration: 'Access is not a

9. Duncan Smith, 'London's Population High: Top Metropolis Facts,' *BBC News*, 2 February 2015, www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-31056626.

10. 'London welcomes 17.4 million international visitors in another record-breaking year for tourism,' *London & Partners*, Wednesday 20 May 2015, www.londonandpartners.com/media-centre/press-releases/2015/150520-london-welcomes-174-million-international-visitors-in-another-record-breaking-year-for-tourism.

Andrew Ranville, *Perch (Rabbit Island)*, 2012-14; Rabbit Island artists-in-residence are invited to use the installation as an open-air studio and research platform; courtesy of the artist



Andrew Ranville, artist and executive director of the Rabbit Island Foundation, shared his experiences of public sculpture at PSC's discussion on public art, *Doing It In Public*, 12 Nov 2015. One of the topics that surfaced was the growth in sculpture as a platform to host other activities.

In her presentation for *Doing it Public*, Katherine Clarke of muf architecture/art spoke about gently intervening in Altab Ali Park in Whitechapel. As part of their ongoing exploration into social responsibility and the public realm, muf created a raised walkway that follows the footprint of a church that once stood on the site. This new seating transformed the park, with this expanded territory hosting an ongoing 'festival of hanging around', to use Katherine's turn of phrase. Here the religious and the secular, the foreign and the local and natural and built environments come together in a matrix that shapes individuals and communities.

Altab Ali Park, 2011; photo credit: Cristina Monteiro



Of Soil and Water: The King's Cross Pond Club

2015 saw a series of temporary commissions in, and in keeping with the redevelopment of King's Cross. On behalf of the property developer Argent, art curators/producers, Delcroix Pinsky commissioned artists and architects to create a range of public artworks to celebrate the area's heritage and future. Unfolding over three years, these commissions are also part of a programme designed to ignite new public usage of the vicinity that is in line with the developers' design for its future life and inhabitation as a major mixed-use commercial and residential area.

In *Of Soil and Water*, The King's Cross Pond Club, Berlin-based artist Marjetica Potrc and Rotterdam-based architectural duo Ooze celebrate the power of nature to regenerate itself and to modify human behaviour in the heart of the capital. The UK's first ever man-made freshwater public bathing pond, it's located in the middle of King's Cross. *Of Soil and Water* posits the fragility of building sites as places in transformation in contrast to the self-regenerative power of nature, thus addressing the value of land versus that of nature in the contemporary global city and the equilibrium human beings need to find between the two.¹¹



Courtesy of John Sturrock

11. Delcroix Pinsky, 'Of Soil and Water – Marjetica Potrc & Ooze', www.delcroixpinsky.com/of-soil-and-water-marjetica-potrc-ooze/ accessed (27 January 2016).

concession but the gorgeous norm; we create spaces that have an equivalence of experience for all who navigate them both physically and conceptually. muf deliver quality and strategical durable projects that inspire a sense of ownership through occupation.¹²

Contextualising public artworks depends on this kind of awareness. While community consultation may be an embedded aspect of the commissioning process, the truth is that often the artwork in question has been signed, sealed and even delivered before this ever takes place. The ethics of this aside, many artists would surely struggle to pay lip service to a process that actively curtails the responsive development of their artwork to its immediate environment. Public consultation is often most successful when it supports artists in the early phases, cultivating their artworks' site specificity. This can generate something that garners a stronger sense of community ownership, too.

Recalling muf's interest in 'ownership through occupation', this resonates quite differently in the case of this year's Fourth Plinth commission, Hans Haacke's *Gift Horse*, which surveils Trafalgar Square with lofty seriousness. Established in 2005, the Fourth Plinth is arguably the highest profile platform for public sculpture the world over. Those surprised by this year's selection include the artist himself, who has said he never expected his proposal to be chosen, given the critical nature of his practice.¹³ For sure, works like *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, A Real Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971* actively critique the nexus of city, power, property, money and art, in this case based on the shady real estate dealings of Harry Shapolsky between 1951 and 1971. But *Gift Horse*? Drawing on Stubbs's paintings of horses, inspired by the long tradition of equestrian statuary and dressed up with a ticker showing London's latest stock prices, this huge bronze sculpture signifies ambiguously. Is its message free advertising for the corporations featured on the ticker or a sad reminder that all too often art is a gift horse or, more accurately, artists are, when they give so

12. muf architecture/art, www.muf.co.uk/profile (accessed January 26, 2016).

13. Hans Haacke, comment made at Looking Gift Horse in the Mouth: A Symposium on Hans Haacke, ICA, 7 March 2015.

much of their labour and value away for free.

If sculpture was ever the province of sculptors these times have gone. With its increasing crossover with architecture in the public realm combined with the professionalisation of the field today, this art form is attracting the interest and expertise of not only artists more broadly but also an increasing number of designers and architects. Moreover, artists aren't only competing with these non-artists for public art projects, they're also losing to them. Witness the case of the art/design/architecture collective Assemble winning the Turner Prize this year.

In addition to innovative projects, designers and architects produce slick and effective proposals. They're often beautifully laid out and narrated with clear cost projections outlining the budget and contingency and thorough risk assessments. We learned this first-hand when judging VITRINE's 2015 Bermondsey Square sculpture commission. Ultimately, and regardless, this year's selection panel chose sculptor Frances Richardson for the commission. Her sensitive proposal prioritised the phenomenological encounter and alluded to the grandeur and elegance of classical art, while the artwork also declared its affinity for modern minimal sculpture and contemporary material

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technologies. Suffice to say, had the judges been different, the result may have been too. The confidence inspired by the designers' and architects' canny interpretations of the brief may have easily won the day.

A scribble on a napkin still holds a magic in many artworld contexts. But as we've sought to observe here, aura is only one aspect of public art. The message to artists in 2015 is that operating in the public sphere takes more than creativity. Grit, charm, determination, diplomacy, organisation, cunning, resourcefulness, likeability, project management, strong communication skills, a knack for collaborating and a respect for administrators and the work they do. These are some of the qualities required to survive in the world of public art commissions. Those with a sculptural sensibility should be very good at this, as it turns on negotiating relationships as well as the constraints and practicalities of production: managing time, sourcing materials, dealing with suppliers and learning new processes. The world of sculpture is rarely one of isolation in the studio. It instead involves working with a range of other people in the course of an artwork's production.



Frances Richardson, *Loss of object and bondage to it*; Fig. 2, 2015; courtesy of VITRINE and the artist