

Frictions and Resolutions: Michael Pinsky's Public Works

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An artist's activity, whether they admit it or not, is circumscribed by institutions and conventions; conventions to do what art is and should be, and institutions that promote and sustain that consensus. And artists, whether they like it or not, have to engage with these institutions and conventions in order to thrive. Art is never a self-sustaining activity, conducted in a vacuum; any artwork's existence is dependent on the situation in which it gets to be seen, and the support of those who make that situation happen is critical in realising that.

Traditionally, if you could tell what art was supposed to look like – a painting, a sculpture, or whatever – you could also make a fair guess at the situation in which the artwork would find itself; the art gallery, the art museum. These were spaces which separated the interests and activities of artists from the rest of what went on in daily life. But over the last few decades, that division has become increasingly uncertain, as artists have stepped over the physical boundary of 'where art happens', by making art which exists outside and beyond the usual contexts of art's presentation, often in what has become known as 'the public sphere'. And in doing so, some artists have come to question a less visible boundary, to do with who an artwork is for and, critically, who sanctions and allows an artwork to happen. As art has moved beyond the confines of the gallery space, it has also moved beyond the reach of those who direct its particular context – curators, museum directors – and towards encounters with institutions and powers that had previously left the making of art to its traditional institutions and operators.

Over the past decade Michael Pinsky's increasingly public artworks have pursued a striking exploration of the complex set of negotiations, expectations and aspirations that flow between the different 'stakeholders' – in the language of contemporary policy – that influence the fortunes of contemporary public art. Pinsky, as 'the artist', operates with close attention to the interests that come to bear on the realisation of his projects; the interests and aspirations of commissioning agencies, municipal or national, centralised or local, and the interests and disinterests of the public that is often the notional 'target' of such commissions.

Pinsky's approach allows for the various ambiguities and tensions inherent in this triangle to emerge via the work itself, often allowing the content of the work to reflect their influence. Rather than operate from a position of antagonism, or of critical distance, his working method is deliberately hospitable and enabling of the requirements of gallery institutions and commissioning bodies, as much as of the desires of the local publics that are so often the implied subject of his work. This doesn't mean that it operates as a form of complicity, even if one understands complicity as a form of 'secret subversion'. Nor does Pinsky's hospitable and enabling approach to commit itself to a seamless image of success, of satisfied clients and successful conclusions – provisional outcomes, deferments and compromises run through projects which, at first glance, appear satisfactorily concluded. Rather, Pinsky's way of

negotiating the differences between commissioner, artist and public recognises the imbalance of powers already inherent in this situation. The jargon of contemporary management best captures these imbalances; the artist is a 'service-provider', the commissioner the 'client', the audience the 'consumer'. Not forgetting that in contemporary art, the commissioner often sees themselves as 'service-provider' to the public for whom, and to whom, the commissioning of public art is supposedly being done.

But whether the local community or the public wish such services to be provided is one of the implicit questions that Pinsky's work subtly probes; the hidden logic of public consultation – how symbolic recognition of the public is the inverse of its actual empowerment – determines the tone of how an artist is commissioned to make a public artwork. Running through many of Pinsky's commissioned projects is an understanding of the limits imposed on the artist to work to a particular brief – not to do merely what the artist wishes – as much as the limits generated by certain expectations, by the commissioner, of what should be deemed good for the public. What this understanding generates in practice are works that are not afraid to work with humour and pathos, and to wander from the banality of social systems to more mythical or allegorical narrative registers, rooted in the urban imaginary of the communities that these works encounter and engage.

In two early projects, *Transparent Room* (1998-2003) and *In Transit* (2000-03), Pinsky sets out themes that persist throughout his later public works – the imaginative reinvention of actual places and localities; and the visualisation of administrative and bureaucratic information into aesthetic events. As gallery-based works, they each reflect on their difference from the world outside, using the visual codes and conventions of contemporary art. In *Transparent Room*, a six-sided projection-booth formed a space within which views might witness video documentation of what lay beyond the confines of the gallery; the sky beyond the roof seen from below, the gallery on the floor below seen from above, the city beyond in all four directions. With *In Transit*, Pinsky investigated relative journey times between different places in a city, mapping visual distance according to time rather than normal cartographical scale, producing quasi-abstract graphic devices that nevertheless revealed, on scrutiny, the information that was responsible for their visual form. What is at stake in both these earlier projects is the purposeful blurring of the visual traditions of gallery-bound contemporary art with a clear attention to everything that lies outside of that context of presentation. With *Transparent Room*, the minimal 'white cube' of the modern art-space was reproduced inside itself, in order to become a surface onto which everything outside of it was projected. This is more than simply a video document of the world outside being presented as a work in a gallery; instead, the boundaries of the art gallery – its walls, roof and floor – are substituted with what they normally obscure. *In Transit* offers a similar insight – that the style or forms of geometric abstraction reveal themselves to be diagrams of movement around an urban space of which the gallery finds itself part. Rather than claiming the autonomy of the 'pure' work of abstract art, the graphic designs of *In Transit* invest such visual abstraction with a code which anchors it in ideas of relative distance or proximity.

If these two works identify a founding interest how sober investigations of social reality and moments of idiosyncratic visual play can be combined, yet remain distinct, this interest opens

more fully in Pinsky's subsequent, properly 'public' commissioned works. And it's in these works that the relationship between artist, commissioning context and the work's public becomes fully integrated into the character of the work itself. With *Transparent Room* and *In Transit*, the audience could be identified as the self-determined public for contemporary art, but from *Turning Point* (2001-02) onwards, the specified nature of Pinsky's audience becomes the locus whereby both artist and public confirm and confounds the expectations that tend to dominate art commissioned under the banner of local relevance or social participation. And it is through the use of playful, often absurdist connections that these projects stake out their territory.

In *Turning Point*, Pinsky was commissioned to respond to the locality of the Hythe, on the outskirts of Colchester, a suburb that had once been a thriving port for sea-barge traffic but, with the shift to road transportation, found itself economically redundant. No longer a functioning community, many residents having left, Pinsky picked up on the arrival of colonies of swans in the abandoned docks. This provided the cue for a series of surrealistic videos in which swans appeared to inhabit other sites of the Hythe – swimming amongst car parks, across the local bridge, or rooting about in the metal junk-piles of the breaker's yard. These videos, projected large on the side of an adjacent grain silo, formed the backdrop to a concluding live event in which the breakers yard crane operators performed a choreographed 'crane ballet', swinging mechanical claws and tossing scrap cars about, to the tune of *Swan Lake*.

Turning Point's deliberate use of the iconography of redundancy, of the imagery of nature reclaiming the post-industrial landscape, and its humorously celebratory climax combine in a contradictory mix, where the decline of the Hythe becomes the subject of the work, just as much as it is the pretext for its commission. There's no pretence here that the work can in any obvious sense make anything better. Rather, humour and pathos here conspire with the audience to affirm what everyone already knows – that the Hythe's moment of community and economy has now passed.

It's a paradoxical form of memorialisation and celebration, highlighting this key aspect of Pinsky's approach to commission and audience; *Turning Point*, unlike many other more conventional socially-involved public artworks, doesn't patronise its audience by presenting it with a simplistic 'positive message' about community or regeneration. By recognising that its audience may already have come to terms with social change, the work indulges the participants in a playfully absurd theatricalisation of the theme of decline and dereliction, turning it into an artistic presentation. Similarly, in *Breaking the Surface* (2002), overtly addresses the now defunct docks of Bridgewater, surrounded by residential newbuild, but become a handy dumping ground for useless old iron. Pinsky's response was to mount an improbable resurrection of the things dredged up – old bicycles and shopping trolleys – rigging them up to appear to float above the surface of the water, illuminated eerily at night, like ghosts. In tandem with this display, he led local children in making audio recordings of these items, played like instruments, the sample edited to produce a sound piece which was then collectively 'broadcast' by residents of the dock from their home hi-fi's.

This 'recycling' of what already is apparent in a local situation is an important aspect of Pinsky's work; as he puts it, almost everything he makes is a re-arrangement of objects, relationships or actions that already exist. So, in a more recent commission as part of *The Lost O*, for the town of Ashford in Kent, Pinsky similarly reclaimed a mass of disused road signage, relocating them as a kind of Stonehenge-like ring beside the unloved Ashford one-way ring-road, then in the process of being converted to a supposedly more friendly two-way system.

In all these, what is at stake is how an artist understands the artwork's capacity to reflect and represent a more complex sense of a local audience's appreciation of its context, one which allows for an acknowledgement of redundancy, failure and loss without overcautious concern for presenting a 'positive message'. This strategy is not simply a whim of the artist, but in fact objectively represents the distance between the interests of the audience, the artist as provider of a cultural 'intervention' and the commissioning body that allows the artist to make that intervention. While nevertheless directing itself to the experience of its audience, it plays this against the expectations of those who would expect a more 'conventional' work of context-specific social art, or an unproblematic, one-way transition from institution to artist to public.

The theme needn't be dereliction, of course, but rather any thematic point of contact where local knowledge might interact unpredictably with a normative assertion of what 'local identity' consists of. In *Pontis* (2002-03), Pinsky reworked the signage of Wallsend metro station on the Tyneside metro system, making all the signage bilingual in English and Latin. This ostensibly drew on Tyneside's strong historical roots in Roman Britain, an intelligible connection with the thematic of 'heritage' through which local identity, in official culture at least, is often negotiated. *Pontis* fulfilled the task of connecting contemporary Wallsend with Roman Tyneside, yet the connection stretches the point – contemporary Wallsend has, one might conclude, little to do with Roman Tyneside; *Pontis* created a wayward context which fantasises about a contemporary Britain still under the cultural sway of Rome, to reflect on how notions of local cultural identity cannot be simply and unproblematically rooted in the history of a place.

Pinsky's witty and quietly anarchic humour may appear to engage with the context of public art presentation, and how effectively it engages with the identity of its local audience but, as we've noted, this approach is effective in questioning the motivations and agendas of those who direct the artist's work towards an identified public. By increasingly representing his activity in terms of a form of creative consultancy, Pinsky has managed to loosen the narrow identification of artists as producers of 'public art', thus loosening the terms of the 'service' being provided, and allowing for a more elusive interaction with the expectations of both audience and commission agency, a strategy exemplified by the project *Pinsky Projections*. Working as artist-in-residence in the Urban Planning Department at Chelmsford Borough Council, Pinsky operated in the same manner as an architectural or development consultancy, producing working plans, visualisations and public-space information for increasingly curious and outlandish proposed urban developments, with the aim of soliciting responses from the public. In this case, it was the public that was being 'duped' by Pinsky's acts of institutional mimicry – with, in this instance, the collusion of his host, Chelmsford Borough council. In every proposal, the bounds of credibility and artistic appropriateness were pushed: from lines of street fountains that followed the path of sewage lines, changing height according to sewer activity, to a public sculpture the elements

of which would expand and decline according to the income and expenditures of the council's parking enforcement department, to a glass cube sited in public, within which council workers would take turns to work one day a year, in full view of the passing council tax-payers, to a huge doughnut shaped office development passing through the arch of an elevated railway, *Pinsky Projections* proposed urban features which broke the rules of what should count as public sculpture or innovative 'regeneration' architecture.

The evident irony of *Pinsky Projections* was that none of the proposed schemes were particularly problematic as examples of 'signature' regeneration projects, nor particularly unacceptable as examples of contemporary public art. By closely mimicking the aesthetic and cultural tone of both contemporary architectural fashion, and a public awareness of contemporary public art, *Pinsky Projections* instead combined awkwardly inappropriate content with artworks (sewage; petty-bureaucratic municipal administration), or forced an exaggerated over-identification with the more breathless boosterism of regeneration architecture eclecticism; for example, a torus-shaped building to house an art gallery and 'creative industry' businesses, or a "new landmark restaurant and entertainment centre" shaped like an early valve radio "recalling the enormous influence of Marconi on Chelmsford throughout the 20th Century" Such simplistic associations are the bread-and-butter of contemporary public art: Anthony Gormley's celebrated *Angel of the North* near Gateshead is constantly discussed in terms of how its steel structure refers to the ship-building that used to be a major part of the Tyneside economy. By performing the outward appearance of regeneration development and public consultation, *Pinsky Projections* revealed to what extent anything is possible, if sanctioned by the appropriate authorities, while gently satirising the public's exclusion from the institutionally opaque processes that present even the most benign forms of urban renovation as *faits accomplis* – here the aesthetics of transparency, the visualisation of hidden municipal functions, and the co-option of the feel-good cultural value of the leisure, entertainment and creative economies all point to the democratic gap that positions the public as passive recipients of urban, social and economic change.

Diverting the already-existing content of a place or situation to make works that reflect back on its *status quo*, particularly as it is experienced by the general public, is a feature of many of Pinsky's projects, and that act of reflection further questions the identity of 'the public' as an appropriate subject for artworks. By making works whose explicit content is the ordinary experience of 'ordinary' people, Pinsky highlights the way in which people are often encouraged to become passive spectators of public art projects, rather than instigators of them. In *Routes*, for example, Pinsky took the bland 'monoculture' of Oxford's park & ride bus service – anonymous shuttle routes from out-of-town carparks to city centre – and made a number of interventions that incited the users to reflect on their normal engagement with its function; from an animated sequence depicting cars parking, shown on the bus, to a mini-golf session conducted on the car park itself, to leaflets describing scenic walking routes between the two park and ride sites, Pinsky's *Routes* made the humdrum acceptance of Oxford's congestion management into a playful exploration of alternative ways of thinking about the city's space and its uses. Rather than being exposed as art-spectators to artworks disengaged from the experience of normal life – as supplement or amelioration to a less than perfect world – those that encountered *Routes* were addressed as spectators of their own civic reality, and the possible alternatives to it that might occur if they were to act differently.

By assiduously seeking out the most conventional, most local, most recognisable aspects of the situations in which his artworks operate, Pinsky performs a very specific paradox: By allowing nothing which is 'alien' or external to those contexts, Pinsky excludes any overt display of the idiosyncrasy or specialness of the artist, as someone distinct or aloof from the general public, someone endowed with peculiar and eccentric gifts of self-expression and aesthetic genius. But by apparently manipulating 'what is already there', Pinsky is able to make the kinds of 'outsider' observations on the world that are actually the practical preserve of the artist, and which reflects the privileged but precarious reality of the artist's role – being both inside society and outside of it at once. The figure of the artist, if nothing else, is the individual who more than others in society navigates the gaps and tensions that exist between other parts of society – people and institutions, those who make culture and those who consume it, between artists and functionaries, and between functionaries and the public. Pinsky's artistic sleight-of-hand is to refuse to invest his position with anything that might mark him out as particularly 'artistic', someone whose difference, while appreciated precisely for its non-conformity to normal reality, can thereby be easily defined, compartmentalised and contained, for the entertainment and curiosity of others. It's a strategy that makes him 'transparent', a manipulator of situations whose presence is all but invisible, and which returns attention to the nature of those manipulations, themselves wrought from the already-existing iconography of the localities they inhabit. Pinsky's paradoxical operation is to make the habitual distinctions between artist, patron and public *more* evident rather than less, precisely by attempting to merge, in the form of the artwork, these distinct and different positions of interest. It's in this relentless dedication to resolving the divisions that operate in the production and reception of art made in public, that Pinsky succeeds in revealing their continuing and unresolved reality.

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