

NAVIGATING PLACES

Charting a course

The first in a six-part series 'Navigating places', Jane Watt profiles the River Commissions project, a series of temporary works along the River Hull corridor.

SUZANNE LACY, THE AMERICAN ARTIST and writer who championed the phrase 'new genre public art' noted some ten years ago that, "whereas a work of individual art executed in the studio needs approbation only after its creation in order to move into an exhibition space, a public artwork must rely from its very inception on some degree of cultural approval. That is, for a work to be made in the public sector (except for extremely transient and guerrilla works), it must enter a negotiating process with those who represent that sector".

Then, as now, the representatives of the public sector, or public domain, with whom artists find themselves negotiating, are numerous: councillors, planners, architects, community members, private business, the list goes on. Throw into the mix a dash of funding guidelines and criteria, and the result can be a heady – if sometimes explosive – cocktail. The fine line between sweet success and sour grapes in a public art project is often illusive.

Three years ago Hull Time Based Arts (HTBA) became the 'mixers' of a new public art project, River Commissions. This large-scale series of temporary works along the River Hull Corridor area presented a variety of sculptural, photographic, installation, performance, audio and web-based work from 2000 to 2002. The commissions comprised eight new time-

based projects and an education programme that included mentoring opportunities for local artists as well as a series of seminars on public art-related issues.

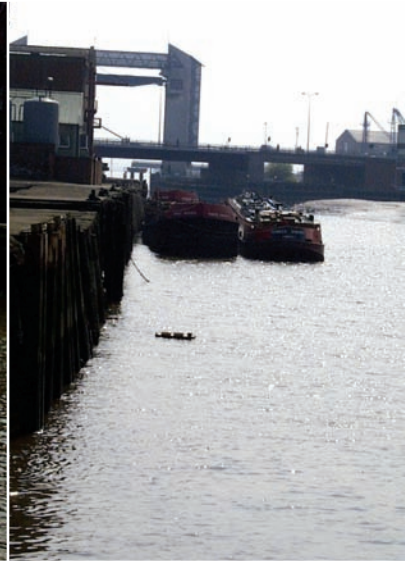
The seminars launched the project and were "intended to raise the profile of the River Commissions programme... and encourage debate about the contribution that public art can make to urban regeneration". This last point was particularly important as River Commissions, like much of the urban public art that has been funded and realised over the last five years in Britain, was attached to the political and economic drive for the revival of inner-city areas. In River Commission's case, it was predominantly financed by Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) funding. This type of government funding allows an ambitious project, to be implemented; for artists to produce new work and to be paid for their time, and for new collaborations to be formed; for art to reach, challenge and inspire a broader audience. However, such good and worthy outcomes come at a price: a timetable and political agenda must be adhered to at all costs. In the case of the former, artists often find a way of tapping into, or even subtly undermining, political issues. The latter is usually non-negotiable; funds must be spent within financial years, and outcomes accounted for in neat,

up-beat final reports. If artists were trained as accountants, then maybe this wouldn't be such a problem but then we wouldn't have a car cut in half and mounted on a bridge (Michael Pinsky's *Symposium*), nor Rona Lee's *Breaking the Surface*. Rona Lee's interest to involve "the revelation of something that is normally hidden" led to a pearl being photographed by an electron scanning microscope which magnified its complex layers. This process revealed the irritant which had caused the oyster to produce the pearl and the resulting images – which play with micro and macrocosmic illusions of scale and detail – were then displayed in lightboxes embedded into the lawn of the Wilberforce Museum on the banks of the River Hull.

This process and work provide a good metaphor for artists working within the public domain and, in particular, city redevelopment. The artist is often seen as an irritant who will trigger the creation of something new, and hopefully positive, to a building or regeneration programme. The critic Jeff Kelley asserts that the artist can be someone who "brings a fresh and unencumbered sense of design to architectural projects". He goes on to say that artists can "somehow enliven otherwise conventional corporatesque environments". In this sense, the artist will bring a new dimension to a project or they will reach and engage with



Above: **Michael Pinsky**, *Symposium*, 2001. Pinsky cut a car in half and mounted one half on the edge of the Wilmington Swing Bridge and the other on a nearby bank. The two halves were reunited to become one when the bridge swung shut. When this happened the car alarm and lights were triggered in a joyful display of reunification. Opposite page: **Benedict Phillips**, *Dark Water and Dry Dock*, 2002.

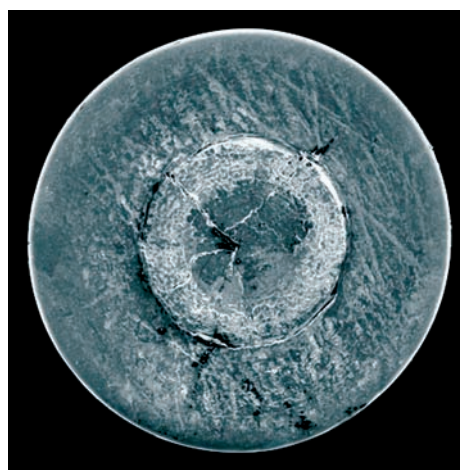




Above: **Stefan Gec**, *Truelove*, 2002–2003. Gec highlighted Hull's whaling industry history and the story of an Inuit couple who had been brought back on one of the whaling ships, the *Truelove*, by an enlightened captain so that they could inform the British whalers and public about the brutality which their people faced at the hands of the whalers. Gec made copies of the plaster cast heads of the two Inuits which are on display in Hull's Maritime Museum. He then mounted the new busts on an existing steel pillar in the river, close to the Tidal Barrier.

individuals and groups who would otherwise not be involved in the regeneration debate; the very people who are affected by the outcomes of this discussion. Steve Bradley, a USA-based artist, managed to initiate a dialogue with a variety of public individuals and groups: "For me, in some respects the most interesting part of the project was negotiating with the various people in the community of Hull to realise *Reading the River*." His work for River Commissions explored ideas of waste and consumerism. Bradley, with the help of students from Hull College, collected debris from the streets around the Hull River Corridor to use in two installations. The first, *Site Layers* was based at the Ferens Art Gallery in which he laid out his found objects as a documentation of litter collected over a few days in March 2002. Bradley acknowledged in this work, that his forensic type approach to retrieving and then displaying what others have discarded, sat uncomfortably within the opulent, pristine marble interior of the gallery. This work, although generated from the public domain, was viewed within a conventional gallery setting and in this way did not have as immediate a response as his second installation *Archaeology of the Contemporary*. Here, he rebranded and resold the collected waste material back to the public in the Hull Trinity Indoor Market. Much to Bradley's surprise, he sold twenty-five pieces within a week. However, the dialogue generated through the process of setting up the stall and trading with the public was what he found most rewarding: "It

gave me a chance to talk to people with whom I might otherwise not communicate. I was surprised by the openness and desire for these projects to be realised by the various people involved in this process. For instance, the manager of the indoor market was thrilled by the opportunity for an artist to work in the working public's domain, rather than trying to get the public to go into the gallery environment." Bradley admitted that his relationship with individuals and groups involved in the realisation of the work was a "delicate" one. Such partnerships



Opposite page: **Steve Bradley**, *Reading the River*, 2002.
Bottom: **Rona Lee**, *Breaking the Surface*, 2002.

require a gradual development of mutual trust necessary for the work's success. On large commissions such as this one, where external timetables and budget requirements must be followed, time can be precious. Often a project's success boils down to the simple, but illusive, qualities of personalities just getting on, as well as a commitment to the process of realising the artwork.

An additional, yet nonetheless tricky, element is serendipity. Benedict Phillips witnessed this in his installation/performance *Dry Dock*. He developed a good working relationship with Marks and Spencer who were very interested and accommodating to his project. Phillips recreated a mini version of the river in one of its large shop windows: six cardboard models of cargo barges sat on mud taken from the river. Once a week, at a set time for six weeks, Phillips performed a launch of one of the barges into the River Hull or Humber. As Phillips carried the barge down to the river he attracted, Pied Piper fashion, interested (and sometimes primed) onlookers. A chance encounter in the river added a fairy tale element to one of the performances: "on the fourth outing of the six, followed by forty kids and sixteen adults, I made my way to the Humber where we lowered a boat, *The Princess*, into the water. As the group watched, *The Rix Eagle* (a 70ft barge) appeared. It was exhilarating to see this huge boat as it passed close to the 5ft model and propelled it forward in its wake. At this point *The Rix Eagle* was chasing *The Princess*, pursuing her until the crew could manoeuvre alongside and pick her up. The barge then turned around and came past us with the cardboard boat on board. All the kids shouted "Put it back in the water!" over and over again...until eventually a crew member hurled it back into the water for it to be swept down river away from us, towards the Humber bridge and the sea".

The very fluid nature of the public process and resultant artworks and interventions in River Commissions seems particularly appropriate as this project, both in concept and context, was centred on a major British waterway. However, River Commissions also highlights a broader assertion. Publicly sited and commissioned works call on artists not just to be creative individuals, but rather like the cardboard Princess, they must be navigators in the sometimes choppy waters of the public domain.

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'Navigating places' is devised and written by Jane Watt in collaboration with [a-n] MAGAZINE. The series will explore and highlight a variety of artists' projects in the public domain touching on the nature of the artists' role and their critical concerns when negotiating making work in public places. Jane Watt is an artist and has recently completed a PhD at Manchester Metropolitan University – a field and action study of recent artists' practices in public art commissions.

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You can see individual artists' work at:
www.rivercommissions.org
www.michaelpinsky.com
www.rona-lee.co.uk

The Hull River Project:

www.kingstonrowing.dabsol.co.uk

