



“to create a public monument, the artist must eventually let his or her ‘baby’ stand on its own”

NAVIGATING PLACES

In memorium

Jane Watt discusses contemporary approaches to the creation of public monuments.

This month, it will be announced which artist has been selected to make a new temporary sculpture for the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square. From 11 December 2003 to 8 February 2004 the public could view and lodge comments about models of the six artists' proposals in the foyer of the Sainsbury Wing at the National Gallery, London¹. The shortlisted artists – Chris Burden, Sokari Douglas Camp, Stefan Gec, Sarah Lucas, Marc Quinn and Thomas Schütte – are, like the previous Plinth artists – Mark Wallinger (1999), Bill Woodrow (2000) and Rachel Whiteread (2001) – well-known in the art world. Rather like a public art version of the Turner Prize, the Fourth Plinth will no doubt provoke outrage, headlines and debate. This along with the display of the commissioned work outside one of the nation's most well-known art institutions (and possibly one of the most photographed public spaces in Britain) – will certainly raise the profile of the winning artist. The winning artist will probably be the only currently well known author of a sculpture in Trafalgar Square. Before I visited the exhibition of Fourth Plinth maquettes, I walked around the public space and looked closely (for the first time) at the bronzes atop plinths one to three. Only one statue, of George IV, was obviously signed by 'Frances Chantry, Sculptor'. To be honest, I, like many I'm sure, had never paid much attention to the other sculptures in the square. They all blurred into the fabric of the place: bronze generals and lions, Nelson's Column, a fountain, and lots of pigeons.

The Fourth Plinth project is an interesting one as it stimulates discussion on a number of issues in public and monumental art: the resonance and relevance of placing a sculpture on a plinth in a very public place; the introduction of a contemporary work of art and contemporary issues into a

Above:
Krzysztof Wodiczko,
City Projections, 1985.
Commissioned by
Artangel

Facing page:
Mark Wallinger, *Ecce Homo*, white marbelised resin, gold leaf, barbed wire, 1999. Courtesy: Anthony Reynolds Gallery





Above:
Kenny Hunter, *Citizen Firefighter*, 2001.
Photo: Steve Mansfield

traditional public square and lastly, the old temporary versus permanent debate.

As this project has demonstrated in previous years, perhaps most notably with Wallinger's *Ecce Homo* – a life size, humble depiction of a Christ figure – the monument, as an art form, does not have to be a big bronze bold statement which will last for centuries. It can have a more subtle, but no less, commanding presence when it challenges both scale, perceptions of authority and power along with physical permanency. Trafalgar Square is no stranger to this. In 1985, Krzysztof Wodiczko projected the image of a missile onto Nelson's Column: *City Projection*, thus subverting not only the ideas surrounding monuments to war, but also the notion of art on plinths. Like his series of similar projections worldwide in the 1980s and 1990s, he used traditional monuments and institutional buildings as platforms for his own politically charged projections.

As we have seen in the last year, monuments do have value as symbols of power, ideals and propaganda. True to the tradition of overthrowing regimes, the powerful (although some may say slightly orchestrated) image of toppling one of Saddam's many monuments to himself proved a symbolic point in the world's perception of a shift in power from old to new in Iraq.

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Over a decade before, similar scenes in the former Eastern Bloc and Soviet Union took place. In the artist Pavel Büchler's essay *Stalin's Shoes (smashed to pieces)*, he recounts the impact that a 14,000 ton sculpture of Stalin had on Büchler's hometown of Prague. He recounts the rise and fall of the monument through successive regime changes. However, he notes that: “the statue, like a Titanic of public sculpture, survived its physical destruction. The ritual decapitation, the night-time demolition of the statue, and the ‘deconsecration’ and gradual deterioration of the symbolic site, left an equally symbolic absence which has given the missing statue a lasting place in the psychological topography and vernacular toponymy of Prague.”²

Richard Serra's monumental *Tilted Arc*, 1981, which was commissioned and made as a permanent work for Federal Plaza in New York, is now probably more well known, and is mentioned in more publications on public art, due to the controversial (and ultimately successful) campaign to remove the sculpture³. It is not so much the absence of the actual piece – a seventy-three ton curved plate of steel – but the questions that arose in the petition to remove the sculpture, and the artist's reaction to this motion against his work, which have become legendary⁴. Serra did not take the challenge lying down. He argued that as the sculpture was site specific, to remove the work would be ultimately to destroy it and consequently a breach of his commission contract. Under this reasoning he sued. It was a nasty, drawn out case which resulted in a ruling against Serra. The work was removed from the site in 1989. Whilst some applauded Serra's courage to defend his work, and rights as an individual artist, others, like the American writer Suzi Gablik pointed out: “what the *Tilted Arc* controversy forces us to consider is whether art that is centred on notions of pure freedom and radical autonomy, and subsequently inserted into the public sphere without regard for the relationship it has to other people, to the community, or any consideration except the pursuit of art, can contribute to the common good.”⁵ However, just what constitutes “the common good” is possibly as intangible, subjective and controversial as what makes for “good public art”.

Closer to home, and more recently, a new controversy which will hopefully be resolved somewhat less acrimoniously, is Maggi Hambling's *Scallop* – a celebration of the English composer Benjamin Britten – on Aldeburgh beach in Suffolk. Although not as large as Serra's *Tilted Arc*, it valiantly stands twelve feet tall against North Sea gales. Since its installation in November 2003, *Scallop* has prompted fierce public debate. Although it has had considerable financial and moral support from local individuals and businesses, it has also prompted a petition of around five hundred names. This is quite a remarkable act in itself as the popular seaside village of Aldeburgh only has a population of about 2,500⁶. The petitioners are not against the work per se, they want it moved to another site by the arts centre, a few miles down the road at Snape Maltings⁷. Although this may appear on the surface to lessen the blow, Hambling

echoes Serra's concerns. She has been quoted as saying "I think it is very sad, because the piece was conceived and made for that particular spot.... Moving it would deny its point: that is the stretch of coastline that inspired Britten and that is what it is there for – to celebrate him"⁸.

So, in the light of these, and the many monumental works that have not been mentioned, what is the role of the artist who is commissioned to produce a public monument? If it is to distil a community's beliefs or thoughts about a particular event, person or ideal, then he or she is bound to have a very steep uphill struggle. Public consultation of some kind is now usually a prerequisite for any publicly sited work. The scope for discussion can include: a few public meetings chaired by a commissioning panel; an exhibition of the ideas along with a web, or postal, address for comments (in the case of the Fourth Plinth); workshops; or residencies within the community.

Whatever process the artist undergoes to create a public monument, the artist must eventually let his or her 'baby' stand on its own and develop its own autonomy in relation to society. This process is what the critical theorist Roland Barthes would call 'Death of the Author' which allows the 'Birth of the Reader' and transformation of the work (or text)⁹. Consequently, the true test for a public monument comes after the artist has gone away, or the steering group has been disbanded.

Like any publicly sited work, the more successful public monuments (in terms of public popularity and resonance) have been ones which the public has adopted as their own. Kenny Hunter's *Citizen Firefighter* which was unveiled in Glasgow, 2001, was originally commissioned to celebrate the work of Strathclyde Fire Brigade. However, it sadly took on a different meaning two months later in the wake of 9/11. It became a focal point around which people could gather to express their emotions, think about and discuss the shocking events which had taken place. The Strathclyde Fire Brigade held an impromptu memorial service there and members of the public placed flowers, candles and expressions of sympathy. In this way, the work's function and meaning shifted. It is no longer just a publicly sited sculpture of a firefighter. Through histori-

cal events and social interaction, it has developed a new resonance far beyond that which Hunter intended.

In this form of public work, the importance of the artist's input and persona quickly fades. Through the absence, or metaphorical 'death' of the author, the work is reborn as each generation and chapter in history makes it their own, or consigns it to oblivion. These public monuments and memorials could be said not just to mark public figures, events and ideals, but also the passing of generations of artists.

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The Navigating places series explores and highlights artists' projects in the public domain over the course of a six-part series. Subscribers can access the previous four articles – Charting a course, July 2003 issue, Private musings: public projections, September 2003 issue, Back to school, December 2003 issue and Creative learning curves, January 2004 issue.

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- ¹ They could also view the ideas online at www.fourthplinth.co.uk
- ² Büchler's essay can be found in Harding, David with Büchler, Pavel (eds. 1997), *Decadent Public Art: contentious term and contested practice*, Glasgow, Foulis Press.
- ³ See Tom Finkelpearl's 'Interview: Douglas Crimp on *Tilted Arc*' for an account of this project in *Dialogues in Public Art*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, MIT Press.
- ⁴ Public Art Forum's conference 'Should I stay or Should I Go?' in Canterbury, December 2003, addressed issues of decommissioning public art. See www.publicartforum.org.uk for more details.
- ⁵ Gablik's essay 'Connected Aesthetics: Art after Individualism' is in Lacy, Suzanne (ed, 1995) *Mapping the Terrain: new genre public art*, Seattle, Bay Press, p79.
- ⁶ It should be noted that Aldeburgh experiences a big influx of weekenders and holiday makers.
- ⁷ At the time of writing there are no plans to move the sculpture.
- ⁸ Quoted in John Ezard's article 'Aldeburgh wants shot of Britten shell' in *The Guardian*, 6 January 2004.
- ⁹ Barthes' chapter 'Death of the Author' can be found in Barthes, Roland, (1977) *Image, Music, Text*, (trans S Heath), London, Fontana Press.



Left:
Maggi Hambling,
Scallop, 2003. Photo:
Malcolm Farrow/Suffolk
Coastal District Council.