

# The Process and Practice of the Artist in Public Art Commissions in Britain at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century: a personal dialogue with five case studies

by  
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## Abstract

This thesis aims to provide a fuller understanding of the processes and practices which artists undertake in public art commissions in Britain at the turn of the twenty-first century. It examines the artist's experience of public art commissions through a combination of participant research and field study modes. The first three case studies are: Alison Marchant, Martin Richman and Jane Watt (the author). They provide evidence from public art commissions undertaken during 1998 to 2000: *East Londoners*, *Millennium Beacons* and the *Guild Hall* project, respectively. The final two case studies - *Five Spaces* (1999), Glasgow and *A Splash of Colour* (1998), Birmingham - broaden the research by including evidence from commissioners, a public art agency, architects, public and clients.

The enquiry focuses upon: the inter-relationships between the artist and other parties involved in public art commissions; the impact these relationships have on the artist and her practice; the problems encountered and key skills that need to be developed.

The conclusions are that to operate in the realm of commissions, public artists must be open to dialogue, negotiation and delegation. These practical imperatives are located in the broader theories of dialogism (Bakhtin), hermeneutical concepts (Gadamer) and the new genre public art paradigm of interaction between artist, work and public. Wider group dynamics, specifically organisational politics and power structures (Handy), influence the case study artists and artworks.

This study shows that process-based approaches can give way, under pressure from funding and external agendas, to more product-driven imperatives. Embedded within the public artist's participatory practice exists a tension with her own sense of authorship and autonomy.

It is the author's contention that existing public art commissioning guidelines are not being routinely adopted, or implemented by commissioners. The lack of regulated professional support structures and training leaves the public artist financially, legally and professionally vulnerable.