



Public Art and the British Vandal

by Patrick Wright

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THE REMAINS of 'Ash Wall', a 45-foot length of pinkish-brownish laminated glass, stands a few hundred yards from the Thames Barrier in south London. The work was commissioned in 1992 by the Public Art Development Trust, acting as agents for Greenwich Council, and took the sculptor Vong Phaophanit about a year to complete. The site was pretty run down when he began. The trees in the initial landscaping had already been damaged, but this made him all the more ambitious. 'I knew from the beginning,' he said, 'that it would be a problem. But I didn't want to accept that the idea that art shouldn't be in a bad area, nor that it should just be about making people happy.' Vong chose glass because he wanted to reflect the area - to catch the cars, the warehouses, and the nearby auto-wrecking yards, too. He put salmon-pink silk beneath the glass panels on one side, and wood ash under the other, because they mean different things to people from different educational and cultural backgrounds.

A section of the sculpture was deliberately cut out and moved back to form a 'gateway' which is not directly visible from all angles, but can be walked through nonetheless. Since the river had long been a route of migration, trade and colonisation, it would evoke the idea of a frontier that was both real and illusory. Ash Wall was intended to gleam like the Thames Barrier itself.

Peter Palumbo, then chairman of the Arts Council, came to the work's inauguration in September 1993, and spoke proudly of what public art could do to a place like this. Peter Bottomley was there, too. Then the piece was left to fend for itself.

Ash Wall was not entirely without resources. It was internally lit, so that it would glow at night. Its glass was designed to withstand the toughest of blows. An internal alarm had been installed, and the work was supposedly also in view of the National Rivers Authority's surveillance cameras. But these defences proved insufficient. First, the glass panels leaked, so that the ash darkened in



places, and then the local vandals moved in on this stranded symbol of regeneration.

To begin with, one or two panels of the glass were smashed with stones. Then the work was rammed with six-foot concrete bollards. It became routine to find rebounded rocks strewn all around it. As Vong remarked ruefully, his Ash Wall turned out to be 'perfect for this kind of target practice'.

The work is now a dismal sight. Every one of its panels is shattered, and the rocks are still accumulating despite the high fence that surrounds the injured work. The attendants at the Thames Barrier last week described the vandalism as 'disgusting'.

The men at the nearby salvage yard, CJ Wreckers, were more contemptuous of Vong's efforts. 'Everybody thinks it's rubbish,' said one, 'a waste of taxpayer's money, total crap. Nobody understands it. All we know is that we went out one day and there it was.' Told that this extra-terrestrial visitation had cost £60,000, he ventured that the money should have been given to Greenwich Hospital.

Vong might have hoped for a more sympathetic account in the art press, but so far there have only been more hurled stones. A brutish notice in *Art Review* took the side of the vandals, declaring that Phaophanit's work looked like 'a confrontational barricade positively inviting assault', and suggesting that the park would have been 'nicer' without it. 'Who needs a raspberry-coloured glass wall?' it asked, wondering why 'green sites have to be blighted by publicly-funded organisations (£120,000 plus a year) such as the Public Art Development Trust'.

The Public Art Development Trust defends itself against the accusation of incompetence. Ash Wall was part of a 'coherent development strategy' for the area, and this so-called 'park' was intended as a sculpture garden from its inception. As for the public for which the work was intended, it should be remembered that the Thames Barrier attracts a diverse and fairly sophisticated group of visitors from all over the world. Sandra Percival, the director of PADT, is hoping to raise funds to remove the work and re-establish it at a different site. But Vong feels understandably bruised. An art work like Ash Wall needs proper security and maintenance, certainly, but the redevelopment of a sunken area also demands education, and thorough-going economic and social reform: 'You can't raise a place with a work of art alone.'



Vandalism has long been a problem for those who seek to uplift the public with art. It is a violent plebiscite, the price many artists have paid for taking their work to the masses. Last week the people of Lewes in Sussex asked to have the town's most famous piece of sculpture - Rodin's 'Kiss' - returned to them, after spurning it as indecent in 1917. But the story of Vong's Wall has far more in common with the fate of Eric Gill's nude, removed from Holland Park in west London last year after 35 years of pollution and vandalism had done their worst, and Henry Moore's bronze 'King and Queen', decapitated this spring by vandals in Dumfriesshire. Ash Wall is just one more on a long list of public casualties, intended to uplift, but much more often scorned.

A recent report, published by the Policy Studies Institute, reviewed the boom in 'public art' which occurred in the Eighties. In the Fifties and Sixties, the Arts Council may have sought to uplift the public - and to justify its own funding to artists - by placing original works in front of people who would never dream of visiting a gallery, but in recent years we have been encouraged to think of art as an economic development strategy.

The Arts Council promoted a 'Percent for Art' scheme designed to ensure that 1% of the budget of any given development would be reserved for art works. It helped pay for public art officers in the regions, and to establish a series of new public art development agencies. Colleges soon started offering specialist courses for the same market. The results are now everywhere to be seen, in town squares, urban parks, shopping malls and even forests, and they are sometimes far from impressive. With lottery funding promising a further escalation of activity, this is a good time for critical reappraisal.

Sara Selwood, who researched the PSI report, describes being forcibly struck by the extent to which the Arts Council was promoting government policies during the Eighties. The public art development agencies may have been set up with some public money, but they were bound to raise the rest of their revenue through commissions, and this created a stronger pressure for throughput than for quality or a proper engagement with the public. At its worst, the ethos seems to have been shove it up and move on; and if you make a mistake describe it as 'a learning process'.

Selwood - who said she was soon scraping the barrel when asked to identify really distinguished public art projects - has diverse improving suggestions for the public art agencies, and her criticisms add to those of Peter Dormer, a writer and journalist who has long been on the attack in this area. Dormer points out



that the driving force behind the public art movement is 'to generate work for artists'. In his view, a programme like Percent for Art is inherently undemocratic in its attempt to oblige local authorities to use artists on developments whether they want them or not.

Dormer sees a huge discrepancy between the rhetoric of the public art movement, and the reality it achieves. Its advocates, he says, employ certain specious gambits to insulate itself against criticism. One such ploy is the claim to education: 'When the public gets to understand a work, it will come to like it.' And yet, as he says, 'It is possible to understand a work and not like it at all.' Another gambit is to claim that even public contempt is somehow to the credit of the work - proof that it is capable of 'eliciting responses'. Selwood has heard this argument extended even to vandalised works - as if that sort of attack only confirmed the work's 'power to disturb'. Neither Vong Phaophanit nor Sandra Percival will make any such claim for the shattered ruins of the Ash Wall ('I think not,' says Percival drily). But it has been applied to a piece that Anthony Gormley made for the walls of Derry. This work was actually 'necklaced' with a burning tyre - an outcome that some have interpreted as Gormley 'revealing the tensions of the site'.

JEREMY THEOPHILUS, Senior Visual Arts officer with the Arts Council of England, accepts that mistakes have been made in the past 10 years. In future artists may be differently involved in developments: advising on design, but not contributing discrete 'art works' at all. One of his former colleagues, Isabel Vasseur is presently administering a series of activities designed to improve Norbury Park in Surrey. 'Public art is a bit of a dead issue,' she says, looking back over 15 years of conferences and reckoning there have been too many. People like their nature pristine nowadays and unimpaired by the intervention of any public artist.

The fact is, she says, 'the ecologists have taken over the high ground. No one can move a twig'. Some of the best public art of recent years has taken the environmentalist direction under the auspices of the organisation Common Ground. But a number of other contemporary art agencies have also arrived on the scene. One of these, the Artangel Trust, has become well known for its temporary 'interventions' in public spaces - they produced 'House', the Turner-prize-winning concrete sculpture of the interior of a derelict family house in east London by Rachel Whiteread. Art galleries, too, are laying claim to public spaces. Birmingham's Ikon Gallery recently opened a temporary show called 'England's Glory' at Witney Court, what Liz Ann Macgregor, Ikon's director, describes as 'a



fantastic burned-out ruin' owned by English Heritage. The plan is to 'activate' this roofless but once baronial house with contemporary music and art. McGregor declares that the distinction between gallery art and public art has been extremely damaging. Just because something is outside, doesn't mean to say it is more accessible and less elitist.

Summoning up a local example, she described the sculpture by Raymond Mason that graces Birmingham's Centenary Square as 'hideous'. This piece of 'socialist realism' - blank figures facing forward into a shopping mall future - was not recommended by a public art agency. It's an example, she says, of what you get if you try to please people in advance. [Mason's work has been burned and wholly destroyed by vandals since publication of this article. PW" October 2007]

If galleries are embracing public spaces, there is a parallel tendency for artists to retreat up Olympus and regain their autonomy. After a multiplicity of garden festivals in which it was sometimes a job to distinguish the art from the conservatories and garden gnomes, there's a distinct whiff in the air of art for art's sake, and the name 'art in public' is now being advocated as an alternative to 'public art'. Meanwhile, the phrase 'sod the public' has been heard from leading British sculptors at a recent conference.

The sculptor Richard Deacon is certainly wary of artists handing themselves over to the community. The results can be both 'trite and demeaning,' he says. 'But it seems to me that art-making is in the public domain anyway, in the same way that speech is public. Engendering meaning is a public activity.' The essential thing is that this idea of the public should not be confused with the more instrumentalist one that motivated the drive for public housing or urban regeneration. The malls and plazas from which so many public art commissions have come, mark a 'diminishment' in the idea of public space. They are private spaces in which public activity is concentrated exclusively on consumption. If art surrenders to the logic of these places, it may only serve 'to display the developer as a public benefactor'. But even in such public spaces there are critical possibilities for the artist who retains some autonomy. A sense of deeper 'democratic publicness' can be generated from the art work itself. For this reason, Deacon describes himself as very 'happy to work in public, but unhappy to work to a brief'.

There are good examples of works which fight back like this. Deacon cites Richard Serra's 'Fulcrum' at the Broadgate Centre in London as one example. And he considers Gateshead council an exemplary local authority which isn't



bogged down in 'let's spend the money on housing' reductionism, but instead has commissioned serious works by serious artists: Gormley, Goldsworthy, and Deacon himself. The recently refurbished centre of nearby Middlesbrough now sports a sculpture 'Bottle of Notes', by Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen and is, according to Alan Haydon, one of the officers of Northern Arts, proof that 'a real work of art' can make its own way through initial scepticism and distrust. The 35ft piece, built up from metal handwriting taken from Captain Cook's log, was looked on as controversial to begin with. The leader of the local Tories denounced it as a monstrosity, and the Labour mayor, Ken Hall, had his doubts, too. But now even the football club has begun to talk about Middlesbrough as a place with 'a lot of bottle'.

'I'm pleased with it,' Hall says, happy to elucidate the more recherche meanings of the work of art that is helping to put his economically straitened town back on the map. 'You'd probably be lynched,' he said, 'if you tried to take it away now.'

Tension between an artwork and local taste can be constructive; but there is another view that sides with the public and expects the artist to make definite concessions. The American geographer Dolores Hayden whose new book, *The Power of Place*, describes a variety of projects which use public art to revive the spirits of people in inner-city areas. 'No public art can succeed in enhancing the social meaning of place without a solid base of historical research and community support,' she insists. The artist must leave behind 'conventional conceptions of art as the progression of an idiosyncratic, personal style'.

In Featherstone, a mining town in South Yorkshire, this kind of consultation has resulted in a series of bas-relief sculptures, combined with a community garden, designed by the artist Julia Barton. In the last two decades, Featherstone has suffered serious dislocation with the closure of its pits and is familiar with graffiti and vandalism, yet this work has escaped virtually unscathed. This is perhaps because Barton undertook a proper residency. She moved into a local estate and began with schools, ran 'reminiscence sessions' with pensioners, and modelled her design in a local community centre where people could comment on it. Local sponsors became involved, including the nearby brick company, Ibstock, which fired the work, and the blacksmiths were pleased to produce the specially designed railings and benches.

Barton stresses that her work was 'community consulted but it wasn't community art'. At first people found the twisted iron railings a bit arty, but they now seem well satisfied. As for vandalism, the rule seems to be 'if they don't



smash it up, they love it'. The relief sculpture in particular, which the locals still insist on calling 'our mural', has been a great success.

In her report, Sara Selwood observes that the growth in public art since the Seventies has taken place despite recession. But if those years have seen a boom in public art they have also seen a dramatic shrinkage in the machinery of civic intervention. In the Sixties, the symbol of local authority endeavour may have been the tower block or the gargantuan council estate. Now it is the neo-Victorian lamp standard, the customised iron bench, or the one person operated street cleansing machine. This miniaturization influences our perception of what public art means, and though it is obviously good that the people of Featherstone have turned a forlorn street corner into a community garden, it is in the absence of more thoroughgoing improvements that no one really dares to expect any more.

Public art - uplifting Harlow with the help of Henry Moore - no longer seems a viable option, and not just because of vandalism. The idea of parachuting masterpieces into places of public recreation seems sadly naive in a more sceptical and relativist age, which has no larger dream of cultural improvement. Convention, as well as the civic brief, still demands of the public artist a heroic, celebratory mode. Yet traditions of communal solidarity are increasingly difficult to bring out of the past. The advent of the National Lottery may combine with the millennium to threaten a new age of dead statues - Bomber Harris and Margaret Thatcher battling it out for the vacant Victorian plinths. But the recent history of public art, battered as it is, demands developments of a very different sort: less monumental initiatives that continue the difficult business of showing what a more ambitious public imagination might inspire.

Sara Selwood's 'The Benefits of Public Art' is published this month by the Policy Studies Institute, £17.95.

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