

on the w@terfront



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The Presence of Absence in Contemporary Art Practice in the Public Realm

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A year ago this week, like a lucky (or unlucky) child coming of age, I inherited CBAT an organisation with a considerable reputation for object based art in the public realm.

A decade of environmental improvements, school playground enhancements and stand alone works implemented under a Percent for Art mechanism within the constraints of complex funding and expectation my colleague Wiard Sterk described earlier, and subject to the need to fulfil an agenda of tangible transformation.

Within the context of regeneration the current discourse in public art is attached to, surrounds and is obsessed by the object, the monument. War memorials, commemorative gardens, pocket parks, the physical transformation of public space and the use of artists in 'urban regeneration'. This is hardly surprising given the generic pedigree of art in the public realm stemming from Sienna, Florence, Milan and other great cities where the Medici's, d'Este's and Borgia's formed the original and most formidable Development Corporations of them all.

We the administrators, curators and commissioners, make strong claims in defence of our objects and monuments - they engender ownership, cultural identity, they bring about enfranchisement through cultural capital and empowerment. And above all we please the developers, investors and regenerators with tangible products they can endorse as good value for money and support of the arts and cultural economy. We feed their rhetoric in support of claims that a civilised, stimulating environment engenders and supports a civilised community of fine and upstanding citizens. Moreover we strengthen these claims with our proof that the objects and parks must be successful because they are not damaged or wilfully vandalised. But we never question whether this is truly due to a strong sense of ownership or sheer indifference, after all the transformation of urban space in Britain forms the ultimate irony. We do not permit the selling of birds, skating, extensive street performance and many other spontaneous public use of space.

The current discourse and our involvement and therefore perpetuation of it, fails to acknowledge the necessity for absence, for a little less permanent monumentalism in the public realm, and for the need perhaps to step out of the self perpetuating cycle of grants, lottery bids, project funding, millennium commissions and regional regeneration, before we are wholly responsible for a generation of civic artists perfecting a nifty line in memorials, street furniture and Quayside seating - two for the price of one!

What of our attention to those artists whose work is overwhelmingly relevant to the contemporary public sphere, yet does not centre on objects, or permanent interventions of the traditionally recognised kind. Let us examine a few and see how they fair in the brave new world of regeneration, access and public partnership. Let us look at the different 'publics' they engage in these non-works and anti-monuments.

Melanie Jackson - Lathyard, CBAT 1998

Slide 1 - Land of Cokaygne at Ffotogallery, Cardiff

Melanie Jackson work with CBAT involves the investigation, exposure and re-presentation of powerful fictions, converted over time to apparently unquestionable truths.

Jackson's *Lathyard* project responded to a geographical area around Cardiff Bay, loosely adhering to the line of the River Rhumney, one of the three rivers flowing towards the Severn Estuary near Cardiff Bay. The work involved curating and implementing a city wide outdoor exhibition of significant images, placed at Ad sites in standard bus shelters, the production of multiple postcards and of banners by school children, carrying their own message.

The presence of advertisements and other promotional imagery both overt and subliminal has rapidly increased. In all our cities we are surrounded by proclamations to consume, visit, purchase and possess. The sophistication of the imagery is testament to the increasing visual literacy of the 'public' and the dialogue between marketer and consumer.

In Cardiff at the time of the project and since, there exist a number of advertisements for the city itself, which reveal a more specific position - one of transformation, industrial reform and urban regeneration. They call attention to an atmosphere of transition in 'Europe's youngest capital' and issue a mantra of development, of progress. Many of you will be familiar with this mantra as it was especially effective during the transformation of 'España' in the event of the Olympic games 1992.

For Lathyard images commissioned from eighteen artists including Melanie, were inserted at sites bordering the waterfront development area, residential areas on the edges of the bay and at points along specific historical or cultural routes. The images were to reflect the artist's interest in the public and private aspects life, to perhaps make something private public, or to reveal aspects of our collective public and private personae.

Slide 2 Land of Cokaygne at Ad site near Cardiff Castle

The image used by Melanie herself was 'found'. It details a freak of nature documented in the teratological collection of the National Museum of Wales, Cardiff. An apple perfectly formed yet miraculously growing from the trunk of a tree.

In Celtic legend Avalon or apple-land is the precursor to the Christian association of apples with Eden, and therefore paradise. In the late middle ages the English conjectured that an earthly paradise was located in the west, a land which they called Cokaygne, evidence of which could be found in cargo washed up on the coast of Wales. Wales is of course west of England and Cokaygne rapidly became a derogatory term for working class sloth. Embedded in class stereotypes it was used to describe those who wanted reward without labour, paradise without earning it. This perfectly formed genetic mutation echoes the social perversions and unconscious desires the mythology made manifest and point up its residual presence in contemporary life. It was placed near Cardiff Castle, the large and fantastical permanent manifestation of the wealth of coal and shipping magnate the Marquis of Bute, made on the backs of the apparently resentful working class sloth of the Welsh capital.

The ad sites were already perfectly established for showing artwork. The placement of images at these sites called a halt to the bombardment of advertising imagery and made visible images of an entirely different order and meaning. Like the ads they replaced for a month, they are a temporary intervention, which makes no indelible claim on communal 'public' space.

In addition to the sites the images were reproduced as multiples in postcard form and made freely available in their thousands throughout the city at cafes, bars, shops, clubs, libraries and

post offices. The recognition of the images, their humour, thoughtfulness intimacy and sheer mind boggling meaning was absorbed and the entire city media proclaimed the project a success. In the midst of visitors to the European council conference in Cardiff at the time we demonstrated the sophistication and cosmopolitanism of our city. Our insight and vision in using artists in the city was tangibly rewarded.

However an extension of the project involved Melanie in work with children at a nearby school, on the fringes of the freshly regenerated Bay area. As well as making artworks in banner form, the artist found herself amid hungry, socially disenfranchised children often waiting for absent parents and fending off bullies.

The area around the school has few public services, no public telephones in order, inadequate post war housing, no safe parks, streets or other communal area. There were no Ad sites, as no bus shelter survived for very long before being destroyed. Less than three miles from 'Europe's most exciting waterfront', the area resembles a slowly recovering war zone.

Vinyl banners designed by the children carried their thoughts, aspirations and fears,

One read "I can't go to sleep at night without praying to God that nothing bad will happen", another "I would like to tell the world I will be an astronaut"

There are no images of the banners for they were in place just twelve hours before they were systematically slashed and cut down. Art is not what was needed here it seems and our claims for enfranchisement and empowerment are instantly rejected. Caught up in the constraints of time and a civic agenda for visible park activity, our misguided mission of enlightenment is revealed and we are for a time, stunned.

Jochen Gerz

Slide 3 - Language Plaque at the Harburg Monument Against Fascism 1986 - 1993, Hamburg.

" The single most important factor in my life remains the war I didn't fight"

Jochen Gerz, Paris, 1989

Gerz was born in Berlin in 1940. At four years old the smallest in his family, he escaped from his bombed home through a cellar window and watched while the fir trees burned like candles to the ground. Rendered deaf through the shock of the explosion he recovered his hearing within a short time. His speech however, also lost as a result of this "unreal silent situation", did not return for a year. At five years old he proclaimed that he had lost his childhood and emerged with a consciousness of which he was not previously aware. He emerged carrying the guilt of the crimes of his nation, he did nothing in this war he says, but survive.

" We invite the people of Harburg and visitors to the town, to add their names here to ours. In doing so we commit ourselves to remain vigilant. As more and more names cover this 12-metre tall lead column, it will gradually be lowered into the ground. One day it will have disappeared and the site of the Harburg monument against fascism will be empty. In the long run it is only we ourselves who can stand up against injustice."

Jochen Gerz & Esther Shalev Gerz Harburg Monument against Fascism text.

Slide 4 The Column at full height

Jochen and Esther Shalev Gerz were commissioned to realise a monument against fascism. They entered into extensive dialogue with the citizens of Harburg the details of which are far too

complex for this paper. The resultant column was sealed in a lead skin upon which all who came upon it were invited to write whatever their thoughts, feelings and beliefs desired.

Slide 5 Man signing

Using the steel pens wired to the piece, many inscribed their thoughts. Others used bullets, sharp tools and hammers to damage the piece. Some simply ignored it. Not all the text was anti-fascist. When each section within reach was covered, the column was lowered into a kind of sarcophagus at its base.

Slide 6 After Sixth lowering 1991

Eventually it was fully lowered and sealed above with a secure plate, only visual access could now be gained, through a small glass slit in a steel door (a replacement for the damaged glass door, which had been shot at).

Slide 7 After the Final lowering

The monument disappears, all its meanings, its own ageing process and its significance for generations to come, locked in a tomb in the centre of the city.

Remaining above ground is the plaque, reminding us that "In the long run, it is only we ourselves who can stand up against injustice."

Slide 8 The Bremen Questionnaire 1990 -1995, detail

Here Gerz collaborates with students, to the aim of a sculpture, which existed only for those who imagined it.

Again Gerz questions groups of people, this time 50,000 people.

269 responded and decided to go on with the project. The work is derived from the answers of the citizens of Bremen, from all social layers, to questions about art. A wide range of issues emerged. Xenophobia, violence, fear of political violence, manipulation and environmental destruction were recurring themes.

These people were considered and operated as co-authors of the work yet they were the 'public'. Many more 'publics' existed via the network of support used to publicise the questionnaire - Bremen Art Academy and University, the city's cultural institutions, the daily newspaper, on TV, Radio Bremen and throughout the prison service. In addition Gerz and the co-authors held numerous well attended public seminars. The site for the piece was already established on the Smidt Bridge over the Weser River, as a result of the public seminars.

The extent of the discourse of art in the public realm was far ranging yet one clear signal recurred - that Bremen's traditional object centred approach to public art was redundant -to quote Gerz' s text it was "feared rather than wished."

Slide 9 The Bremen Questionnaire

In 1994 the foundation and the State Senate of Bremen approved the concept that a sculpture in the public realm does not necessarily have to be or represent an object.

The piece was inaugurated in 1995.

Slide 10 The Monument Against Racism, Saabrücken Castle 1990-93

Gerz, again collaborating with local students created on the square of the castle a monument against racism.

The artist approached 66 Jewish communities of former east and West Germany requesting lists of their cemeteries in use up to the time of the National Socialist dictatorship. As a result the most complete list to date of Jewish cemeteries in Germany was established.

Illegally, without authorisation and in the middle of the night, the students removed cobblestones from the centre pathway of the square, leading to the castle, replacing them with temporary stones. Onto each of the stones removed was carved on the underside, the name of a Jewish cemetery. The stones were then replaced in the square in their original positions.

In 1991 in the castle, once the headquarters of the local Gestapo, the council of the region voted for the legalisation and inauguration of the *Invisible Monument*.

The lists increased until 1992 due to further information from the Jewish communities and reached 2146. This informed the title *2146 Stones - Monument Against Racism*.

The chiselled stones were returned to the central pathway in two stages and since then have remained invisible to the viewer.

Slide 11 Signage

The Minister President, Oscar Lafontaine and other significant Jewish representatives inaugurated the piece in 1993. Signage for the piece was installed and unveiled during the ceremony. A publication including all the cemeteries was produced.

With every work Gerz calls into question the very nature of art and the tools and methods used within it. Every work questions the need for remembrance and seems to bolster the need for forgetting and laying to rest. In every work he reminds us that it is not the monument which provides salvation, but ourselves.

Stefan Gec

Slide 12 Natural History, Pilgrim Street Fire Station, Newcastle Upon Tyne

26 April 1995

On the 9th anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear accident *Natural History* was premiered. Huge portraits, photographic reproductions on vinyl 4.5 X 3mtre each were erected on a scaffolding structure on the roof of Pilgrim St. Fire Station, Newcastle upon Tyne. The piece was 18metres long.

The portraits were of the first six fire fighters to die in the attempt to contain the disaster at Reactor Four of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Station. The men were allotted three minutes each to physically clear radioactive debris from the roof of the power station. Their protective clothing, issued by the authorities was inadequate for the task.

The size and composition of the images relate to those used in Soviet countries. They relate directly to Soviet iconography. These icons usually hail heroes and leaders, however the six fire fighters were only briefly celebrated in the Soviet press at the time.

The images drew attention and diverse comment, some thought they were the pictures of those on duty today, others a birthday prank. In any event a visual and intellectual link was made between the dead men and the men on duty today - those still facing the danger.

The piece was next shown in Derry in Northern Ireland and this East West move traces the path of the fallout which drifted from Chernobyl in the spring of 1986.

Slide 13 Once Removed

Stefan's initial visits to Chernobyl were met with suspicion and hostility until it became clear that his aim was personal as well as professional, and the Natural History Project was explained. The relationship between the artist and the firemen at Chernobyl, abandoned guardians of the sleeping yet still potent threat, suddenly shifted.

A button was cut from a tunic and presented to Stefan in a gesture of solidarity and mutual understanding. This act formed the genesis of *Once Removed*.

The loss of the original button in the process of casting into another material – one representing material value - presented the artist with a considerable conflict.

Slide 14 Submarines

Around 1989/90 the collapse of the Soviet Union was in full swing and Stefan began the first of a series of works in the public realm, related to historical this historical event and to his personal exploration of his Ukrainian father's displacement and exile. The project is on going.

Stefan discovered that eight Russian Whiskey Class Submarines were to be scrapped at Blyth shipyard in the North of England, Britains largest decommissioning yard. The submarines were part of the Soviet Naval Fleet and had played a major part in the early days of the Cold War.

Steel from each submarine was cut and made into eight large bells, installed on a wooden pontoon surrounding one leg of the High Level Bridge spanning the River Tyne.

Slide 15 Trace Elements, Bells

Purpose built wooden spurs were constructed to blend with the original structure and from these the eight bells were hung.

At low tide the bells were left hanging and at high tide the river submerged them. While underwater the flow of the tide activated the bell clappers and the vibrations of their ringing were carried out to sea, travelling back to the shipping lanes

the submarines once patrolled.

In 1994 the bells were transported to other locations in Glasgow, Helsinki and Derry, all coastal ports near national borders. These installations allowed the industrial and political histories of both the cities and the material to merge. In particular it highlighted the movement of the submarines in the waters of the Atlantic, North and Baltic seas during the Cold war, by reflecting their unseen journeys. At these sites the bells were not allowed to become submerged and were housed in bell towers on dry land, forces to stay visible.

Slide 16 Drawing for Buoy

Continuing the process of transformation and movement the metal from the submarines was again melted down and incorporated within the fabric of a fully operation navigational Buoy.

The Buoy marks safe shipping lanes, locates dangerous marine objects and entrances to safe havens. The movement of Buoy, loaded with its cold war history will take it through waters it

once patrolled as a Soviet submarine, this time its function is a positive one, guiding vessels in the lanes of the Atlantic Ocean, North, Baltic and Barents Seas.

Slide 17 & 18 Mc Allisters

The scale of the projects involved a great many publics. The workers fabricating Buoy at McAllisters, members of the International Association of Lighthouse authorities, Trinity House London, Oxford Laboratory, Ormeau Baths Gallery Belfast, Trimble Navigation Spain, Ray Scrivens software, Locus+, Northern Lighthouse board and the UK Met Office – the list is endless.

All these publics were involved, informed and enfranchised with their cultural capital long before Buoy hit the public art world headlines.

Slide 19 Buoy and shipmates

Slide 20 Buoy at Sea

Aside from the positive and transformative aspects of Buoy are the personal notes from a boy to his father. A father from a different culture and nationality, displaced, alienated and keeping many stories hidden from his family.

Buoy was originally designed to come to rest at Murmansk, close to the town of Stefan's father's home and to the area where the submarines were originally built.

The project has gathered so much pace that there is now a website and new software is being developed so that Buoy will be able to communicate atmospheric conditions.

This commemorative work is both an intensely private tribute to a father's wartime experience and a son's search for ancestral connections. It is also a very public, universally shared exploration of the circumstances and activities of the Cold war, the connections between the two and the process of placing the project in the public realm.

These projects engage numerous publics and operate on many levels well beyond the agenda of regeneration and social facilitation.

Stefan Gec is currently working with Cardiff Bay Arts Trust at Cardiff's most historic shipping dock, the Oval Basin. The site is loaded with historical resonance, at first created to fulfil the need to export enough coal to fuel the world and eventually being partly filled with waste from one of South Wales most horrific mining catastrophe's.

Conclusion

These artists and others are dealing with the human, social, iconographic and historic aspects of regeneration – not simply the physical structure which is largely objectified.

They are challenging the perpetual underestimation of audiences of all kinds, sometimes falling foul of an all too aware "public", but nevertheless avoiding the dilute agenda of "access".

We need artists like Jackson, Gerz and Gec not only to challenge and inspire us with the courage of their exploration into cultural ideology, alienation and enfranchisement, but also to hold up a mirror to our own blinkered vision.

The current stasis in discourse is for me echoed in Melanie Jackson Project Soil & Seawater: 0798 New York. The text demonstrates the narrow field of vision in current discourse, hurtling towards the immovable object that is the regeneration agenda.

The text is as follows and is derived from a recorded exchange, via navigational radio, between a US Navy vessel and a Coastguard:

A: "Please divert your course 15 degrees to the south to avoid a collision."

B: "Recommend you divert your course 15 degrees north to avoid collision"

A: "Negative. You will have to divert your course 15 degrees to the south to avoid collision."

B: "This is the captain of a US Navy Ship. I say again divert your course."

A: "No. I say again divert your course."

B: "This is the USS Lincoln, the largest ship in the US Atlantic Fleet."

We are accompanied by 3 destroyers, 3 cruisers and numerous support vessels. I demand you change your course 15 degrees to the North or counter measures will be taken to ensure the safety of this ship."

A: "This is a lighthouse. Your Call."