

Utilising public space. A look at art beyond the gallery.

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Introduction

This essay will discuss the importance of art outside of the gallery space. This will be done through highlighting the benefits of displaying art in public and the effects those works will have on the space or the reverse. As a disclaimer, I will not be discussing the benefits of displaying in a gallery space although I am aware of such. This essay purely focuses on public art.

“Art is not an amenity but a necessity” (Drake. J, 2000 citing Gormley, A). What this quote argues is that art isn't something that is just there to look pretty and make things more appealing, it is there to provoke and to question us. It is something that Gormley, like many others argues is something that we require and something that we need. If we consider this quote as reality, then isn't it a fair argument to say that Art should be easily accessible and you should experience it on a frequent basis? If so then public art is an avenue that needs to be explored further.

But what is public art? I have found that this subject is a lot more complex than it first seems. In truth the two words ‘public’ and ‘art’ do not simply just fit together. The relationship between the two words can be pushed. For instance a gallery is considered a public space, but does that make it accessible to the general public? Well It could be argued otherwise, art in galleries is important but it is also a very intimidating space to the people who aren't avid gallery goers. It has an atmosphere that can be very uninviting and seem very select. Further research shows that the definition for public art has been determined as “art placed in public places and spaces, open to everyone to use and enjoy.” (Knight, 2009 *preface citing Bach 2001*).

However, we can best understand art and its public functions once we consider its relationship to the public. For instance if we were to consider how a piece is supposed to challenge someone or something and how it causes reactions or feelings that are onset by the meeting of the work and how does the artist tackle that issue in creating the work? The artist must truly consider who they might be meeting as an audience and the space of which their work will inhabit. Taking this into consideration as we examine the works ahead and the spaces they inhabit such as a space of which you could walk through daily including streets, squares or parks. Truly public spaces.

The first work this essay will be discussing is *Alison Lapper Pregnant* made by Marc Quinn in 2005 which is a 3.5 metre sculpture of artist Alison Lapper who was born with phocomelia, a condition in which the person is born without arms and in this case shortened legs. This piece was displayed in London's Trafalgar square, as a part of the fourth plinth project where it stood above crowds of people passing by.



Figure 1. Alison Lapper Pregnant

The fourth plinth project remains to be one of the biggest public art projects in the world, this is because of its vast crowds, its well integrated location and also its accessibility. Marc Quinn's work dares the public to think, not only does it challenge the viewer but it challenges the space and what is acceptable in a public space. But why is Trafalgar square such an important space for public art? well,

“It is thought of as a meeting place between the east and west of the capital city, and as a result Trafalgar Square has played witness to numerous community gatherings, political demonstrations and public celebrations.”

(Defining moments in the history of Trafalgar Square - Google Arts & Culture)

This shows that the location has a rich history and has held many important gatherings. Which in return gives anything in the space an implied importance. For instance this sculpture of Alison Lapper gained her massive amounts of popularity as she was “thrust into fame”(Millett, A. (2008) and raised awareness in what she does. Described in her own words as “artist, television presenter, speaker and Gig-Arts Charity patron” (Lapper, 2017). Lapper now has a wide web of influence in the disabled community and in trying to inspire hope in aspiring artists as one herself.

The artist (Quinn) states he wished to portray “a different kind of heroism” (Quinn,2019) as he aims to create a public display of the beauty of a different body. Quinn’s application of the neoclassical style to the sculpture also suggests a higher level of importance referring back to sculptures of the politicians and powerful figures of the classical era. Through applying this context to the sculpture we unlock a systematic conjunction of a disabled artist with higher levels of power, which has created hope in many organisations such as the MFPA (mouth and foot painting artists) which stands to raise awareness for disabled artists in over 78 countries across the world. Therefore the sculpture being in such a highly public space has in turn created a spike in popularity in an artist who is disabled, who could be a vessel for a message to the general public of the importance of acceptance and awareness surrounding the subject.

Although not all public art has such great reception, for instance in the image below is Richard Serra's work, *Tilted arc*, (1981).



Figure 2. *Tilted Arc*

Richard Serra's work, administered by the GSA (General Services Administration) was an intervention meant to subvert the power of government who were against art, which were incidentally located in the buildings surrounding this piece. *Tilted Arc* then did what it was built to do and caused issues with the people within these government buildings who complained that it was an ugly, "graffiti catcher" (Bonami, F, 2005). The work then went on to have its controversy going to court, after 1300 signatures were collected in favour of removing the *Tilted Arc*. It then gained traction and was put to a public forum where they asked 180 people within the GSA on whether or not it should stay where it was erected. 122 of those people voted in favour of the piece staying there, and 58 of those people voted for it to be removed, most of which were working in the government buildings surrounding the piece. Then disregarding this fact, the court decided to remove the work, which caused Richard Serra in anger to state that "the work does not successfully act as an artwork anywhere else apart from its intended location." (Serra. R cited by Bonami, F, 2005).

However, one could argue that even with its removal, the work was effective. Because it proved to be an obstacle for the individuals within these government buildings, they went so far as to create such a commotion that it resulted in the piece being destroyed. The artwork was divided into three segments and taken out of the square. All of this took place in full public view, and both the installation and the takedown of the artwork were public projects. Illustrating the government's dismissal of creative intent and artistic desire for the public to witness with clarity.

This shows the power that public art can have, causing this much controversy as a wall in the middle of a square. In turn this raised a lot of questions for public artists such as, who is the art for? Was it for the GSA? Was it for the offices surrounding the piece? Or was it for the general public? These questions remain unanswered but it was for everyone and it was supposed to impede on your day, not only to be there for its visual value but to stand as an experience, to cause diversion and involvement. To make a difference in your day to day as a true work of art.

Although, what if we truly consider what art is, the buildings we live in, the streets we walk on, the chairs we sit on every day. It is all art. If we narrow our scope of what art is we miss out on the beauty of so many things in our day to day lives. These things are the things we need most, the things we consider most important. It is a common misconception that we think of art as being this highly recognised painting on a white wall in a gallery space but it's not just that, it is the things that surround us and the things we consume every day. These things are what we see most often. So what if, one of those things that we pass in our day to day lives is *Hibiscus Rising* (2023) made by Yinka Shonibare. It is a work made to represent a thriving community and new found hope in the city of Leeds.



Figure 3. Hibiscus Rising

The sculpture acts as a memorial piece to David Oluwale who “drowned in the River Aire on 18 April 1969 after being systematically harassed by members of the Leeds City police force.” (Thiarai, K. 2023). The sculpture incorporates something that Shonibare imagined would be very important to Oluwale in that of a Hibiscus flower, which is a flower found commonly in Nigeria, where both grew up. Although works such as this with such a rich historical tie do not always come to fruition with ease. As Dr Emily Zobel Marshall says it “was a real struggle”(Vinter, 2023) getting the funds for the piece. As well as also stating that she felt “it’s to do with people not feeling ready to tell these kinds of stories,”(Vinter, 2023). That is exactly why it’s so important to tell these kinds of stories, to show the public how far the city has come and how prejudice did and still does exist but can be diminished by the power of the people.

Although on the topic of funding, it is important to acknowledge the history of monetary issues when it comes to public art. “commissions tend to be from local councils or committees which result in poor quality works where banality has replaced originality”(Clark. T. 2012). This is important to consider because it shows the lack of control the artist and the public has over what is shown in a lot of cases. Whereas the city of Leeds has chosen rather, to support a heart driven, culturally affluent project instead of giving in to the aesthetic hold surrounding public art that has caused so much controversy in recent years.

In making the *Hibiscus Rising* Shonibare applied batik patterns which have a rich history, originating in Indonesia as fabrics and being produced later in Holland to be sold back to West Africa which later gave them a reputation as African textiles. Shonibare says “So it is a way of really looking at the relationship between Europe and Africa”. (Shonibare, Y. 2013) The beauty of that, is that it highlights the element of co-existence and acceptance within a community which is something Leeds aims to strengthen and call attention to. As curator and director of the Artport organisation Vardit Gross said in her Ted talk on public art, “the best art connects me to the city and reveals something new about it” (Gross, 2017) which highlights perfectly what this piece aims to achieve and portrays. Another person who does this to the highest degree is Joseph Beuys in his work *7000 oaks* (1982) as seen below.



Figure 4. 7000 Eichen (oaks)

Following something I mentioned earlier in the essay about 'everything being art' an artist who agrees with this statement is Joseph Beuys who states "that every aspect of life could be approached creatively and, as a result, everyone has the potential to be an artist". (*Beuys . J cited by Mundy, J. 2012*) This theory is known as 'social sculpture' and refers to the beauty of everyday life. As an extension of this theory Beuys created the work, *7000 oaks*. The work was created in Kassel, Germany and entails placing 7000 basalt stones outside of the Fridericianum museum and removing one every time the city planted a tree and placed the stone next to said tree. This was aimed to be a worldwide project and has since reached New York in 1988 which continues to grow to this day.

This work truly encapsulates what public art is about. It is causing the public to see the direct effect of artwork from a creative standpoint. Beuys can be deeply credited with the development of ecology within Kassel, as he creates a very clear and visual language to surround a complex theme within society to this day. Climate change has been seen as a prevalent issue within today's media and Beuys made an early attempt to highlight this issue visually for the general public who in turn would have the greatest effect on change.

In regards to the public's relationship with the piece, since Beuys sadly passed away the piece has been finished with the last tree being planted by his son. Although the public in Kassel still tend to and look after these trees. Which shows the public's interaction with the work getting people involved in artworks almost unknowingly.

It is important to know and to realise that not all public art is as important as this essay suggests. These pieces are a lot more meaningful and have a lot more depth to them than a lot of other public art. Generally councils and cities commission public art to be a lot more decorative. But this essay is to try and shift that focus from the decorative nature of public art into a more challenging realm. This reflects in the pieces chosen in this essay. These pieces challenge our perception of what we should encounter in our day-to-day lives. For instance, if we think of the pieces shown such as Alison Lapper pregnant and Richard Serra's Ark. Would they not cause conversation and reflection within oneself to this day, or at least the conversation that is sprouted from its existence has caused a shift in consciousness in the general public.

In conclusion, the importance of public art isn't just laying in the subject matter, but is also laying in the site of which it is presented. This isn't to argue that art within the gallery space is less important, but that it is less accessible than public art due to the blockade, that is the door, or the wall that prevents people from stumbling onto these artworks in a spontaneous manner. This spontaneity is a key factor in causing people to think of subject matter which might have not crossed their minds naturally but yet has a great importance in the understanding of our world today. Pieces such as *Alison Lapper pregnant*, which raises awareness and strengthens our views on the disabled community. Or pieces like *Hibiscus Rising* which highlights the power of change in a city and how the past doesn't have to represent the present and how we can change for the better. To the opposite side of the scale with a piece like *Tilted Arc* which causes us to look back on it for its controversy and how the government reacted to it in a negative way, possibly shining a light on hypocrisy. These pieces all have proven something important to us as a public and have done such in the most important space of all, the public realm.

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