

## ART AND PUBLIC SPACE, CHICKEN AND EGG POINTS OF VIEW

As a composer, he has chosen to make the city the text, the context and the pretext of his work. The city is his site of predilection, passers-by his favoured listeners. Taking up the question of the relationship between art and public space, he talks to us here of the mark that any offering leaves on public space, irrespective of whether or not we can evaluate its impact, as well as the ways in which the status of a creation changes as soon as it leaves the dedicated sites to come face to face with a real context.

### **Ulverston, England, 3 June 2011**

The English countryside, overlooking Morecambe Bay. Grass, wind, sheep, farmers, dog walkers armed with poop-scoops, roads with little space to pass. A huge public garden by the sea.

Two days later, a 70-metre crest studded with 50 vertical bamboos transformed into 50 natural flutes. Two 80-metre ropes pulled taut making giant flying saucers resonate for the pleasure of our ears.

A hexagon of 24 cellos surrounding an equal number of deck chairs. A labyrinth of 30 Balinese scarecrows, little wind chimes used to scare away the birds. A wind-inspired musical circuit covering an entire kilometre, a constantly changing symphony, an hour-long musical circuit with its successive metric and rhythmic movements until the finale and its coda – in short a *Harmonic field*.

As always, the spectators/residents offer two contradictory perceptions: a vast majority express overwhelming pleasure at the temporary metamorphosis of a place they know by heart and the uses of which are usually strictly codified; and a trivial number of protests from those who in no way want the order of things, in which they have carved out a little territory for themselves, to be altered in any way, even for just a few days.

Among the numerous testimonies of the listeners/residents, two in particular highlight the issue at hand: “I take a walk here every weekend and this place that I know intimately will never be the same; the acoustic and visual landscape will return to what it was before, but for me it will always be marked by this work, even if it was only temporary”.

Or: “I take a walk here every weekend and know every nook and cranny. When I discovered your work, it felt as if it had always been here, that something new had suddenly materialised which was nevertheless latent, simply waiting to appear.”

### **Contextual**

This recent personnel example, chosen among the thousands experienced by spectators of all artistic projects in public space, offers the beginnings of an answer to the question raised by this article and shows how a place which is generally open with multiple uses is transformed by hosting an artistic work.

Any artistic project in public space, or non-dedicated space, holds a dialogue – controlled or otherwise – with its context, a fact which enabled Paul Ardenne to explore the notion of contextual art. The notion of dialogue is fundamental, for while every public space can host a wide range of formats, an artistic act is only relevant if it resonates with its context, if it reveals unknown or hidden aspects, if it helps us to rediscover it. As in the cinema of the real, where “mundane characters” become interesting despite (or thanks to) their mundaneness, the contextual artistic act necessarily magnifies the place where it is performed, which becomes interesting simply because we take an interest in it.

## **Marks**

Perhaps most surprising is the fact that each of these transient projects leaves a lasting mark. The Champs-Élysées, an unattractive thoroughfare wedged between frills, fashion and fast-food, is no longer the same since Jean-Paul Goude metamorphosed it during the bicentennial 14<sup>th</sup> July. The port of Le Havre is still resonating with the steps of Giants created by Royal de Luxe. The Castellane neighbourhood of Marseille still carries the marks left by the Rolls Royce seen driving around ilotopie's Palace à Loyer Modéré (PLM).

This notion of "mark" maintains itself over time. If we take the example of the PLM, very few people actually saw the artistic act. But the symbolic image – a Rolls Royce taking the children from the poorest neighbourhood of the northern suburbs to school – is so strong that it becomes more important than the act itself. Even when transient, artistic acts give renewed meaning, function and poetry to an urban space where the architects focussed primarily on the basic social functions – sleeping, eating, drinking, moving, buying.

But how can we measure the impact of this mark? With which unit of measure? Citizen satisfaction/hour? The fall in crime resulting from an overdose of "living together"? The improved school results of children whose creativity has been aroused? The dialogue of art in public space has quickly fallen into incantation, wanting at all costs to highlight a social function – social cohesion, living together – to justify public funding – to such an extent that it loses the potency of an act which is free, in every sense of the word, the poetic gesture of an artist talking to his contemporaries.

Before always stressing the capacity of art to alter our vision of public space, we must never abandon the symbolic, and even political, force of an act which is absolutely necessary and quite possibly "needless".

## **Reversing the trend**

In contrast, starting with the postulate that an unsolvable question can be solved by turning it on its head, we could measure more accurately the extreme importance to creation of leaving our bubble, our cathedrals, our already conquered audiences to rub shoulders with the city, its spaces used by others, is passers-by torn between pleasure and irritation, its citizens who do not necessarily have the keys to understanding contemporary writings. And to explore the question: "How does public space alter our vision of art?"

In the complex relationship between art and public space, while it is difficult to know what art changes, we can clearly see how it is changed itself.

For artists who have tasted this, abandoning "art for art's sake" is a radical change whereby they no longer focus on artistic technique or on their concern about the views of critics or their peers, but succeed in breaking down conventions, going beyond the established boundaries between scholarly art and popular art, between works and entertainment, between tradition and contemporariness.

Being a "contemporary" artist and only addressing a handful of contemporaries is a modern paradox which should have been overcome. And the solution does not lie in a race to achieve vulgarity and audience figures which immediately strip any creative act of content. However, by marking communal places, creating contextual works which play with what already exists, we immediately abandon the classifications of which the artistic world is so fond.

Let us return to Ulverston and its harmonic field. Are we listening to the work of a bone fide composer or are we enjoying a decorative walk in the country? Are we at the museum or savouring a Sunday picnic? The fact that it is impossible to answer these questions clearly creates a rare freedom. Spectator are not required to be hanging on every word, are not asked to analyse the act with a pre-established chart enabling them to assign it to an aesthetic pigeonhole, and each

spectator-cum-listener finds himself in a situation where he is not guided towards an appreciation linked to what he (believes he) thinks of art, its place and its social utility. Art finds it easier to move forward anonymously than accompanied by a wave of good sentiment and an army of zealous commentators.

“Live anonymously to live happily” goes the saying, which we paraphrase as “create anonymously to create happily”: the label “creation” which can be more repulsive than attractive.

To add another dimension to the eternal question of the relationship between artistic works and public space, we might ask if it is not the work and the artistic act which “make” the public space. A communal space which every individual sees and uses as he wishes only really becomes communal if it has a meaning. The vision of a space provided by an artist, even if it is disliked, transforms it into a space which is really shared, gives birth to a legend, a history, tales which spread, a mythology. Once it has become a place where something has occurred, it is no longer anonymous and becomes a genuinely public space.

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