

Leading or following? Social engagement and mass participation in the Cultural Olympiad

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“(the arts are) central to the task of recreating community, identity and civic pride that should define our country”

The Labor Party Manifesto¹

‘Artists Taking the Lead’ is a commissioning project for the 2012 Cultural Olympiad: an initiative created to deliver a UK wide series of arts events to accompany the 2012 Olympic Games. It is headed by some of the most powerful players in the sector including the Arts Council’s chief executive Alan Davey and culture adviser to the London Mayor, Sir Nicholas Serota. Recently it received a £16m cash injection from the National Lottery, while many in the culture industry have expressed agitation at the redirection of government revenue from the arts into the strategic development and delivery of the games. At the time of writing 59 artists are short-listed for ‘Artists Taking the Lead’, having been selected for both their artistic merit and affirmation of Minister for Culture Barbara Follet’s desire to “unit(e) the country through culture..... leaving a lasting legacy of participation and engagement.”²

Initially Follet’s vision for the awards may give little cause for suspicion: it acknowledges a political belief in the power of socially engaged arts practice to foster moments of community between individuals, while impressing with its hyperbolic proposition of national unity and engagement for all. What is less apparent but more alarming is the extent to which these sentiments position culture funding as a promotional tool for the 2012 Games and as an instrument of the Government’s social policy objectives. Follet’s rhetoric affords little space for the voice of the artist as agitator or political outsider.

¹ The Labour Party Manifesto. Cited in Wallenger, Mark and Warnock, Mary. Art For All? Their Policies and Our Culture, Peer 2000 p.76

² Barbara Follett, Minister for Culture Creative Industries and Tourism
<http://www.artiststakingthelead.org.uk/content/artists-take-lead-£54m-project-cultural-olympiad>

Yet we need look no further than the art produced under the patronage of the Nazi regime or British Imperialist Government to know that artists are often more potent when operating against, rather than in allegiance with prevailing political and social ideologies.

Over the past 15 years, socially inclusive public art practice has grown from grass roots activism to integration into the language of arts marketing, policy-making and funding bureaucracy. The following text offers a glimpse of this trajectory and concludes by framing some of my fears and hopes for the role of social engagement in the 'Artists Taking the Lead' proposals.

In 1995 Suzanne Lacy's seminal book 'Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art' articulated a critique of traditional modernist thinking around the sanctity of the art object, the elitism of the contemporary art world and the tendency of public art to reinforce political and social inequalities. Catalyzed by the political origins of its associated artists and writers, Lacy and her contemporaries espoused community over individual authorship and process over product. As Lacy asserted, New Genre Public Art could "be read through the development of various vanguard groups, such as feminist, ethnic, Marxist.... They ha(d) a common interest in leftist politics, social activism, redefined audiences, relevance for communities (particularly marginalized ones), and collaborative methodology."³ Their views were also galvanised by the backlash against public artworks such as Richard Serra's 'Tilted Arc,' a commission by the mid-1970s Art-in-Architecture program that was removed from its site in New York in 1989 after a public outcry against its obtrusive intervention across a route that local people used on their walk to work. 'Tilted Arc's' failure inspired new genre public artists to develop projects in consultation with the communities for which they were intended, rather than create a preconceived work to gentrify public space according to the political agenda of a funding body. The success of locals who campaigned 'Tilted Arc's' removal revealed public space as a complex arena where differences could be meaningfully articulated and where the pervading forces of social control could be fought. New genre public art gave artists an opportunity to

³ Lacy, Suzanne, 'Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art.' Bay Press 1995 p.25

ask the question: “Does public art involve the viewer in the complexities of urban experience, or is it offered as a decoration or distraction, a sedative that quiets legitimate (political) concerns?”⁴

Among the projects championed by new genre public art is ‘Touch Sanitation’ by Mierle Laderman Ukeles, a work that was part of the artist’s unpaid and self-appointed residency at the New York Sanitation Department. Having listened to the garbage workers discuss society’s tendency to treat them as if they if they were literally rubbish, Ukeles spent eleven months shaking hands with over 8,500 employees, many of whom were women, immigrants or from ethnic minority backgrounds. At the end of this process photographs and written testimonies generated by the artist were used as the basis for a series of exhibitions and events that unraveled the participant’s individual histories. The artist’s performative action facilitated dialogue with a specific community and transgressed political stereotypes (the historically bourgeois and privileged artist extending a respectful gesture to the lower classes). In her willingness to deal with this minority, the artist elucidated a hierarchical structure that is necessary for the facilitation of all public life: the existence of a disadvantaged underclass to serve those in power. She also contradicted the assumption that all forms of self-expression should be withheld from this underclass for fear of rebellion or instability. As Patricia C. Phillips states in ‘Mapping the Terrain,’ new genre public art is “not the grinding, arduous discovery of a common denominator that absolutely everyone will understand and endorse. It actually assists in the identification of individuals and what separates them.”⁵

Subsequent to Mapping the Terrain, artists engaging connections with minority communities have become increasingly unfashionable, replaced by the recent trend in mass participation public art exemplified by work such as Anthony Gormley’s ‘One & Other,’ a high profile project funded by Arts Council England and a range of corporate sponsors. This shift is caused by fears about didacticism combined with the question posed by Grant H. Kester

⁴ Ibid p.64

⁵ ibid p.69

in his writings about community and communication: “How do we form collective or communal identities without scapegoating those who are excluded from them?”⁶ Fears about positive discrimination combined with a political and economic climate that tends to pursue escapism rather than realism, locate Gormly’s work as an example of mass participation that celebrates a homogenised public. ‘One & Other’s’ Sky sponsored web channel feeds live footage of the project participants to a national audience, capturing the public imagination using the paradigm of reality television. Accessible to all but unique for no one, even political protestors who grace the forth plinth offer enough complicity to vacate the platform after his or her one-hour stint expires. Engaging with the established orthodoxies of political power historically expressed through public art (what could be more reminiscent of imperial power than the stone sculptures of Trafalgar Square), ‘One & Other’ does little to counteract established caveats on freedom of expression in public life. Sean Ashton in a recent review of mass participation projects for *Map Magazine* has called this kind of work “socially engaged art at its worst: art that uses the public as undifferentiated material to ‘reach’ the public- and thereby remind the public of its homogenous condition as the public”⁷ The problem with mass participation socially engaged practice as exemplified by ‘One & Other,’ is that presupposes the existence of a malleable public patiently awaiting unification. We are not an integrated nation in our public or private spaces and I see no reason why the Arts Council or politicians should be paying our artists to tell us otherwise.

In his essay on culture and accessibility, Nicholas Murray interrogates this fashionable concept of mass participation and it’s questionable relationship with the culture industry. He rightly asserts that “it is in the interests of cultural producers to have a large, docile, compliant class of consumers who will deliver economies of scale, and good advertising figures.”⁸ Identifying the influence of funding bodies and more crucially politicians, he frames the Labor

⁶ Kester, Grant H, *Conversation Pieces: ‘Community and Communication in Modern Art’* University of California Press p.8

⁷ Ashton, Sean, ‘Art, Adolescence and Sociality’ *Map Magazine*, Issue 19 2009, p 11

⁸ Wallenger, Mark and Warnock, Mary. ‘Art For All? Their Policies and Our Culture,’ *Peer* 2000 p.60

government's frequent platitudes on culture as a linguistic lowest common-denominator that permits mediocrity and sustains our appetite for unchallenging mass appeal artworks. "We live in a culture where a Prime Minister can address an adult electorate using the term 'the feel good factor'..... this is the new standard of value- feeling comfortable." ⁹ Arts funding criteria written by our government and our arts councils desires only to sooth and placate, ignoring the challenges of class, gender and race that define society.

Of the 59 artists short-listed for 'Artists Taking the Lead,' most appear to aspire toward a similar standard of cultural value as 'One & Other,' functioning as social placebos rather than political agitators. I concede that my critique of individual 'Artists Taking the Lead' projects must be carefully framed: all of the works currently exist only as proposals and will acquire increased subtlety and depth during the process of development and production. I also note that a small number of projects do afford some potential for political complexity should the artist choose to develop it: Helen Sharp and the Northern Irish Contemporary Arts Collective site some references to Irish locality. But framed by the memory of divisions and violence that still define Northern Island, their promises of an "holistic approach" and "local participation" appear more as generalized platitudes than attempts to address the cultural specify and political complexity of Northern Island. Martin Creed's 'The Big Ring' proposes mass participation for the East End of London, with "thousands of people, ringing bells on every street corner and welcoming the Olympiad"¹⁰ An apparently egalitarian idea, doubtless capable of generating swathes of press commentary and debate, how might this project develop the political and social self awareness of individuals, or allow unique voices to stand out from the bell ringing crowd? Michael Pinchbeck proposes "Sit with Us for a Moment and Remember," a project that invites the public to sit on 2012 park benches for 20 minutes everyday for a year, creating space for reflection and remembering. On his project blog, Pinchbeck records trials for the work and notes participant's thoughts, with comments ranging from the

⁹ Ibid p.58

¹⁰ <http://www.artiststakingthelead.org.uk/london/martin-creed-big-ring>

banal to the romantic via the brutally honest. “I didn’t feel anything”¹¹ admits Sharfiq from a bench on Belgrave Road. My fear for these artists (all three of whom have individual practices that are powerful and compelling) is that in their effort to “unit(e) the country through culture”, they propose artworks that function as a social common denominator, attracting amusing media headlines but failing to articulate political and social impact beyond their media footprint. I believe that a work of art to celebrate the 2012 Olympics ought to bear witness to the divisions among our local and global populations, evidencing the complex public that we inhabit rather than enforcing political spin about unity and civic pride. As Nicholas Murray usefully reminds us, some art works “far from producing a pleasant interior glow, challenge and disturb, enacting what Aristotle called the emotions of pity and fear. Must art be toothless, bland, inoffensive, bowdlerized, placing no demands on those who engage with it? What about the deep enrichment that can result from such challenges?”¹²

From 59 ‘Artists Taking the Lead’ proposals, I see few who at proposal stage have expressed a wish to ‘lead’ us into the frightening territory of political and social uncertainties that define our divided public. My hope is that from those who are awarded the commissioning grants, some shall succeed in transcending their genesis through government 2012 policy to acquire depth and complexity in their thinking on social inclusion. We are depending on the intelligence and strength of character of our individual artists to achieve this.

¹¹ <http://www.artiststakingthelead.org.uk/east-midlands/michael-pinchbeck-sit-us-moment-and-remember?page=7>

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