

## **MAPPING THE FUTURE: PUBLIC ART IN SCOTLAND**

Ken Neil

*This is a selection from Ken Neil's report on, and discursive response to, the three October 2010 colloquia, Mapping the Future: Public Art in Scotland; supported by Creative Scotland and PAR+RS and hosted by Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design's Visual Research Centre, based at Dundee Contemporary Arts. The full report is accessible through the website of Public Art Scotland, <http://www.publicartscotland.com/>*

My role as *correspondent* for the three events involved listening, note taking, conversing and, most importantly I think, identifying patterns and possibilities as they emerged across the presentations, questions, observations and debates. Tracy Mackenna, in her introduction to the first conference, used the terms 'encapsulate' and 'forecast' in describing the purpose of *Mapping*: this offering is a modest attempt to do a bit more of both on behalf of all participants and interested parties following what was an important milestone for Scotland in thinking about what public art is and could yet be.

'Public', there's no way round it, it's a big word. And then there's 'art': but let's leave that one for now; *public* presents this report with enough of an opening challenge.

*Public* is a word packed with significance and sentiment, and it is a charged word to be addressing through the sub-public mechanisms of contemporary academia with its attendant constituents and correspondents. Candidly, the colloquia did not face the word down. This was a practical evasion, of course, and forgivable, but it is also evidence, perhaps, of the strength of collective presumptions about that word. In some sense, 'public' can quite easily *go without saying* in discourse on contemporary art practice and policy, especially where public participation is central.

Now, an important point of reference for this document and for future planning work in this area is the erstwhile Scottish Arts Council's *Public Art Plan 2009-10*. Creative Scotland will reconfigure that agenda in due course. It is a concise plan, and it too skirts the particularities of 'public' and related contemporary attitudes to same. Usefully, however, that document approaches the concept through a set of described spaces which might together encompass the *where* of the public: 'living spaces, healing spaces, learning and playing spaces, green spaces and unexpected spaces'.

Richard Sennett in his legendary book, *The Fall of Public Man* (1974) remarked on the scope of the disconnection between us (leave that word beside *art* for another time please) and a wider sense of public:

Most citizens approach their dealings with the state in a spirit of resigned acquiescence, but this public enervation is in its scope much broader than political affairs. Manners and ritual interchanges with strangers are looked on as at best formal and dry, at worst as phony.

Sennett ventured, and lamented in doing so, that few people could cope with the seeming strangeness and alienation of the modern urban space; the stranger for most is only a threatening character, to encounter one is to be in a public space outside the intimate, cossetting bonds of family: in cosmopolitan domains, in 'worlds of strangers';

*A res publica* stands in general for those bonds of association and mutual commitment which exist between people who are not joined together by ties of family or intimate association; it is the bond of a crowd, of a 'people'.

And this potentially beneficial *res publica* matters little, of course, to the *falling* public man as he seeks instead the comfort of a sense of his private self, most commonly in the familial context, an antidote to the enervating public arena; self-serving and in-bred. Sennett charts the decline of meaningful public engagement using the retreat to the self as symptomatic touchstone. To take that jaded step back from the public is, then, to tend to the self, the psyche, and the modern pursuit of *privacy*. Sennett registers - with just enough sarcasm - the anti-social and anti-public scenario wherein 'the psychic life is seen as so precious and so delicate that it will wither if exposed to the harsh realities of the social world'.

This diminishing of the relevance of a constructive *res publica* is potentially disastrous for a civilisation undergoing inexorable urbanisation. As the sociologist, Lyn Lofland repeatedly underlines in her work on the unique intersubjective experiential qualities of urbanness:

*...the city provides, on a permanent basis, an environment composed importantly of persons who are personally unknown to one another – composed importantly of strangers.*

The worlds of strangers which make up the urban 21<sup>st</sup> century (and which manifest in the spaces recorded in the *Public Art Plan*) are the worlds wherein, according to Lofland in agreement with Sennett, the public can find its most fitting expression. This is because the individual is to greater and lesser degrees required to make public in negotiation with strangers their private inclinations. To that negotiated end, of course, the individual needs to efficaciously balance her burgeoning sense of autonomy with her sense of public virtue.

Now for contrast, call to mind at this juncture any of those psyche-orientated artists of the 20thC who constructed introspective practices around the divination of meaningful selfhood. The conceit was that that selfhood can ever only be discovered by inward, autonomous reflection and, in turn, by an appeal to the same on the part of the beholder. The practices of *Mapping* situated as they are in the *where* of the Public Art Plan do not agree with the principles of that expressionist programme.

Linked to the above acutely felt contemporary malaise, a second important aspect of 'public' presumed and not elaborated upon during *Mapping* was a certain degree of underlying suspicion directed towards the representative *institutions* of the public

domain.

This suspicion is not always grounded nor clearly focused, of course, but the suspicion, even if conditioned reflex, is always an intriguingly complex blend of personal, experiential recognition ('a duck house?!') and readymade professional adoption ('my respected cultural antecedents bequeathed it, thus it is mine'). And with this tacit underpinning the fall of the public moves closer still to the concerns of a great deal of recent practice which can be regarded without too much contention as *public art*. In other words, that art practice which, on the one hand problematises the inwardness of expressionistic selfhood and which, on the other, challenges institutional formations.

If Sennett is a useful point of reference in bringing to the fore the topical agonising of the individual over the 'who, whats and whys?' of the public on a psychological level, Grant Kester can help us see the creative doubt expressed by artists and others towards those institutions delegated by nations and governments to serve the cultural wellbeing of the public.

As he historicises the countercurrent which influenced so many of our discipline domains, Kester identifies a pervasive institutional critique which sought new forms and new conceptions of public engagement:

Community during the 1960s and 1970s referred to sections of the public that were often alienated from the institutions of high art (poor or working class-class people for example). Artists seeking to challenge the hierarchical isolation of fine art, embodied in the conservatism of the museum and the commodification of art by dealers and collectors, felt it necessary to engage audiences in the spaces and routines of their daily lives.

In the United States, where Kester begins, this shift led to, for example, 'the agitational, protest-based projects of Guerilla Art Action Group (GAAG), the Black Mask Group, and Henry Flynt in New York'. These groups established a practice of pressure on public institutions, galleries, museums, banks...that were deemed, presciently, to have failed the interests of the public proper by serving first their own institutional needs.

Drawing on the energies of the antiwar movement and the traditions of fluxus performance and situationism, these groups staged actions outside mainstream cultural institutions...to call attention to the complicity of these institutions with broader forms of social and political domination.

Prime mover of the Black Mask Group, Ben Morea summed up the drive of many of these protagonists: 'We are neither artists nor anti-artists. We are creative men – revolutionaries. As creative men we are dedicated to building a new society, but we must also destroy the existing travesty'

In the United Kingdom, as Kester goes on to point out, this democratising 'everyday' impulse was to be seen, for example, in the town artist schemes of the 1960s, 'the community arts programs of the Greater London Council in the 1980s, and early projects supported by the Gulbenkian foundation'.

David Harding was present for the third *Mapping* colloquium and shared his unparalleled knowledge of those community practices which are driven in large part by the impulse Kester defines. In an article from 1995, commissioned by The Planning Exchange,

Harding wrote about *Public Art in the British New Towns*, and furnished Kester's analysis with some details in advance. In that article, reflecting on his time in Glenrothes, Harding pinpointed a particular cooperative project which exemplifies the points at issue here about the disconnect with a *res publica* which went somewhat unsaid in Dundee. Harding recollected:

On one occasion I contrived, with some necessary subterfuge, a situation in which tenants were able to choose the colours of their own front doors; an unprecedented act at the time.

Couple this scenario with Sennett's observed self-protecting retreat from the public on a psychological front, and we have in concentrated form the deep foundations on which much contemporary public art practice is based. For here we have a local community, dissatisfied with the conventional public mechanisms for the production of living conditions so material to wellbeing, answered in part by creative and often surreptitious action, which allowed individuality to shine through, against the odds, and *despite* the formal channels which then governed planning and housing.

In terms of negotiating the intimidating thing which is 'public', then, *Mapping* was implicitly orientated around the two perspectives sketched above; to recap: 1) the deep-seated psychological disconnect from the public as a viable concept which results in a tending to the private self, a dangerously significant opportunity cost, and; 2) the critique of the conventional institutions of publicness, and the adoption of counter-strategies in art making to redouble that critique of institutional complacency.

Positively, in line with Sennett's thinking, and in homage to Harding's optimism, the public which went without saying during *Mapping* was a public in which the psyche, the self, can be developed and discovered, not at the expense of it, but through community sociality. Far from a stultified public domain where at best there is hosted the genial meeting of predetermined strangers, the public for *Mapping* was understood over the three symposia as a space of transformational power; one which serves a communal good by being in part good for individual self-creation to boot.

Following its own logic of inception, *Mapping* constructively partnered with representative national institutions precisely to express a positive hope for collaborative ventures in respect of future public art initiatives in Scotland. And this was effected by way of an overt *res publica* in-conference as a method for discussion.

Damien Killeen (Big Things on the Beach, Portobello) reminded the conference that the virtuous cycle of, for want of a better phrase, *creative sociality* cannot be obtained without due care and attention paid to the resident citizen's definition of, and dream for, public art. Future plans need to be informed intelligently and determined in part by the experiences of the audiences of public art, for all of the spaces identified by the *Public Art Plan*.

Much recent topical debate about the impact of budget cuts on cultural activity rightly makes a similar case for the virtuous public potential of the arts. And this potential, of course, is not just found in the production of diverse things which might be showcased *in*

public for the edification of lucky beholders: as Harding and Kester would stress, the potential is for the construction of a viable public *in the first place*.

Francis McKee (Director, CCA Glasgow), in a recent article for the Herald Scotland, makes this case and reminds us all that the arts are essential to any nation's sense of, and confidence in, public identity:

The arts, however, are not a luxury and the issue is not money, but cultural identity. The arts reflect who we are and how we live. They also allow us to imagine alternative ways to live. In the long decades after the first failed vote on devolution, the renaissance of arts in Scotland helped people see themselves differently. They bred confidence and created the cultural arena in which politicians could finally act.

McKee gives voice to a widespread lobby and points to highly positive dimensions of public art in a national context. Public art, including, of course contemporary subsets of participatory art, is a component part of that arena in which national expressions of identity can galvanise institutions and their elected agents to serve productively the expressed public need for cultural identity.

A healthy public for a healthy nation can be instrumentally (and you must stop reading this as a bad word) supported by the strategic support for public art, and the relationships between citizen, publics and art practices can be improved and extended by virtue of the diversity of form and site of myriad public art.

To return to Harding's example, and to force the analogy in sum: just because it is individually alighted upon, the colour of my door is and is not a private business. That colour, and all that it symbolises in respect of determination of self in the world, is arrived at through a non-hierarchical social negotiation. Each different door is both a strengthening of individual identity and of a public *per se*.

Creative practice under the banner of public art frequently makes an extremely valuable contribution to the strengthening of both aspects. This was the positive foundational position demonstrated by *Mapping*: a starting point which chimes again with the earlier *Public Art Plan*.

We want vibrant, creative environments for the people of Scotland to live and enjoy. Public art can help us achieve this. We will nurture and champion Scotland's Public Art nationally and internationally; supporting and profiling best practice across the country. We will work with key organisations across Scotland to champion, support and promote the role that Public Art can play in creating imaginative and stimulating places and unexpected spaces.

The contributions which *Mapping* received can play a role in what happens now with Creative Scotland and Public Art, as new strategies and structures are developed beyond 2010: carrying with them a constituency which might not otherwise engage regularly with creative production: a constituency which can negotiate constructively within a *res publica* for individual, social and national benefits.

These deliberations are, of course, not distant from particular politics, as Sennett, Kester and Harding would tell us. A shift of attention from expressionist individualism to democratic plurality is a political move, although both can readily appear as stereotypes.

The public art scope of *Mapping* was broad enough, commendably, to include big monumental public art-making of a conventional kind, but overall the practices cited and championed by *Mapping* were closer to the politicised New Genre Public Art practices of a Suzanne Lacy. As Lacy famously observed:

What exists in the space between public and art is an unknown relationship between artist and audience, a relationship that may *itself* be the artwork

For Lacy that relationship succeeds when the artist and the audience show the courage required to meet elsewhere than the conventional terrain of normative art medium or art gallery. And to develop relationships in this way is to practice a particular kind of politics. Miwon Kwon described well the political subtexts and surtexts involved:

Foundational to this rhetoric of new genre public art is a political aspiration toward the greater “democratization” of art (a liberal humanist impulse that has always fueled public art). Qualities such as pluralist inclusivity, multicultural representation, and consensus-building are central to the conception of democracy espoused by the practitioners of and supporters of new genre public art.

Some caution is required to temper this type of thinking, as Claire Doherty’s presentation made clear, but the point still stands that this kind of political inclination fits well in the wider Scottish cultural and political scene.

What *Mapping* could not foresee from October 2010 was the political landscape in Scotland of May 2011. With McKee’s comments still in mind; with the requirement to revise and update the national Public Art Plan pending; and with the majority government now in place with more authority for Scotland than previously imagined, ‘public art in Scotland’ is a multilayered project very well placed to build on and improve the relationship between artist and public and likewise between nation and public.

The new government refreshed its commitment to the cultural life of Scotland in its Manifesto, and adopted much of the ethic of new genre public art in doing so:

With our undoubted talent, world-renowned festivals, rich heritage and linguistic diversity we have strong foundations. And, through the effective use of new technology and with the creation of new ways of supporting culture and artists, I have no doubt that the next five years are years of great potential. Scotland can and will flourish and, as we work to build a better nation, our artistic communities have a central role to play as the cultural champions of our nation, at home and in the world.

Before summarising the salient points offered by each symposium, it might be worth thinking on a bit about a Scottish backdrop to *Mapping*, while keeping in sight Sennett and Kester, and McKee. How might the ethic of public art practice line up culturally and politically with an ambition that could be in some way characteristically Scottish?

The colloquia constructively addressed, implicitly and explicitly, the above described issues concerning public art and there was a running concern for what national formations might be taken forward given the ‘existing Scottish expertise’ registered by Jeanne van Heeswijk in her opening remarks to the first symposium.

With regard to the national dimension for the future of public art, Alan Riach’s and Sandy Moffat’s 2008 book, *Arts of Resistance* might help us introduce and structure some

remarks in respect of a Scottish public sentiment relevant to this context. In a section entitled ‘The Manifesto of the Scottish Renaissance’, Riach, Professor of Scottish Literature at the University of Glasgow, considers the importance of Hugh MacDiarmid to the Scottish renaissance movement of the 1920s.

The selected words which follow here, chosen by Riach from a 1925 work by MacDiarmid, represent a manifesto for Scottish culture, one which places an onus on any community with any pretensions about claiming and upholding a proud sense of a national *publicness*. The relevance of MacDiarmid’s words to this context is clear, so too, in turn, Riach and Moffat’s clarion call. The section from *Arts of Resistance* is worth including at length.

Beginning with a quotation from MacDiarmid, Riach’s assessment runs like this:

*The Scottish Renaissance movement sets out to do all that it possibly can to increase the number of Scots who are vitally interested in literature and cultural issues; to counter the academic or merely professional tendencies which fossilise the intellectual interests of most well-educated people even; and, above all, to stimulate actual art-production to a maximum.*

That’s from 1926. Imagine that you have a minister for the Arts, in Scotland, now whose sole directive was those points:

1. Increase the number of Scots who are vitally interested in literature and cultural issues;
2. Counter the academic or merely professional tendencies which fossilise the interests of even well-educated people;
3. And, above all, stimulate actual art-production to a maximum.

Any enervating public formations or practices, such as those identified and critiqued by Sennett, must be revisited and revitalized with the determination of a Ben Morea, to answer MacDiarmid. New structures for tending to the public dimension of a nation’s creative life must be brought into existence, or at the very least, they must be newly imagined.

None of these three manifesto elements can be realised if we have a routine aversion for the self-construction (at individual and national level) which comes from an engagement with public sociality, and none of these three manifesto elements can be realised if we are not invested in the institutions charged to carry out these elements. Sennett and Kester would concur, as do Harding and McKee.

From these collective foundational thoughts about the public, and with the prospect of reinvigorating public art in Scotland in Scotland’s name, *Mapping* set about its project. Keep in mind the three elements given by MacDiarmid through Riach and Moffat through the summaries of the symposia which follow. Notwithstanding the emphasis on literature in MacDiarmid’s challenge, these elements can usefully host and connect the ideas presented in *Mapping*. The manifesto, as summarised by Riach, returns later to underpin the principles recommended here in the concluding section. The combination of MacDiarmid’s simple and powerful ambition with the specific recommendations from *Mapping* might help to point forward to a new round of strategic thinking and *doing* in respect of public art in Scotland.

*Mapping* was a landmark project, one which drew from the very best practices in Europe, and which gathered valuable input from artists, curators, administrators, educators and, of course, from viewers and participants.

It is a matter of fact, that there is a dynamic and highly skilled body of people working within this domain in Scotland, one which is looking forward to the future, to a new instantiation of a public art plan for the sector, and for the population at large. In the spirit of engaged practice towards ‘consensus building’, to borrow one last time from Kwon, Scotland has a pool of expertise which is collectively determined to be an active member of that ‘community of experts’ which might be charged with thinking through the next chapter for public art.

All that that to-be-welcomed grouping of experts in public art in Scotland has to do is answer MacDiarmid’s tenets, for the reasons McKee summarised. This would be to make sure that contemporary public art in Scotland resonates on regional and national and international levels, supported by a structure which shares the same complexion and which shares the same ambition. The *Public Art Plan 2009-2010* gave us an excellent guide as to the *where* of public art, now, following *Mapping’s* lead, and in line with the aspirations of Creative Scotland’s Corporate Plan 2011-2014, attention can turn with confidence to the *how* of public art for Scotland at the same time as our cultural history clarifies and reinforces the *why*.