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How Not To Commission

by Ray McKenzie, Oct 2009



In its information pack 'Public Art Contacts (VAC2)', published in November 2008, the Scottish Arts Council lists six organisations in Scotland that describe themselves as agencies for commissioning public art, or for whom the management of such commissions is a significant adjunct to their main activities. Following the order in which they appear in the document, these are: Art in Partnership, PACE (Public Art Commissions and Exhibitions), RMJM Art Consultancy Service, Jenny Crowe Commissions, Glasgow Sculpture Studio and the Scottish Sculpture Workshop. The list is clearly incomplete, and takes no account of the significant number of Scottish galleries that have embraced the commissioning of new work as an extension of their regular curatorial practices, such as Tramway in Glasgow and the Collective Gallery in Edinburgh. It was also compiled too early to include *A New Path*, the recent joint initiative of Jenny Crowe and Sorcha Dallas that aims to 'invigorate and herald a new way . . . for the commissioning of permanent artworks' in Glasgow.

For all its limitations, however, VAC2 remains a useful document, and provides as good a starting point as any for an investigation of the culture of public art in contemporary Scotland and the commissioning practices that support it. The mere act of drawing attention to the infrastructure that controls the production of public art is alone a healthy development in a debate that focuses far too readily on the work itself and its relationship with its context, and in which the processes that determined how it came to be in that context remain largely concealed from the 'public' for whom it is intended. The truth is that for most of us, most of the time, public art is something that is just there. We cheerfully drive along the M8 and accept the fact that David Mach's *Big Heids* are an integral part of our experience as travellers, and for all that some of us might shake our heads in weary disbelief at the brazenness with which such work is imposed upon us, we also know that we are powerless to do much about it. Anything that opens the process to critical scrutiny and gives the public a voice in the debate is to be welcomed.

An account of the commissioning practices associated with what might be said to occupy the more 'traditional' end of the spectrum of public art is to be found elsewhere in this journal. Here I want to consider some of the strategies that are being developed to initiate and support those forms of public art that diverge significantly from the historically sanctioned paradigm of public art as a more or less monumental statement that inserts itself into the public domain as a permanent fixture. As an example of such work, *Big Heids* is mercifully rare in the violence it does to our aesthetic sensibilities. But in all other respects – in its scale, its physical assertiveness, its durability and its status as part of the 'œuvre' of its maker – it conforms entirely to the established paradigm. It is merely the most egregious manifestation of a practice that we have come to accept as the way public art is supposed to be. A glance, however, at the statements by the agencies represented on the SAC document quickly reveals that there are other paradigms at work. PACE is concerned with temporary interventions as much as with the creation of permanent objects, while for Jenny Crowe the 'social setting' in which the commission unfolds is as important as the physical end product. And while these can hardly be described as radically new concerns in the critical discourse of public art, they are symptomatic of a more general sea-change that has occurred in recent times in the way public art is understood. This in turn has produced a number of new challenges for those involved in the commissioning of public art, and it is these challenges that will be the subject of this essay.

How far is it possible to depart from the familiar monumental paradigm without stretching the credibility of the claim that the results are to be categorised as public art? The obvious place to look for an answer to this is in the multiplicity of innovative practices that began to emerge in the 1990s, but which have their roots in the interventionist strategies pioneered by the Situationist and Fluxus movements three decades earlier. The most prominent – or at least the most regularly cited – champion of such work is the French writer Nicholas Bourriaud, whose book *Relational Aesthetics* was the first attempt to corral a range of disparate practices into an identifiable trend and to articulate the critical assumptions that gave that trend its focus ¹. For all its shoddiness, incoherence and flawed logic, *Relational Aesthetics* was a catalytic contribution to the discussion of this type of work, and has remained a useful point of reference ever since it was published in 1998.

What Bourriaud refers to as 'relational art' corresponds broadly to what more recent writers have variously called 'participation' (Claire Bishop), ² 'social aesthetics' (Lars Bang Larsen) ³ or, on a more generic level, and borrowing heavily from the original use of the expression by Joseph Beuys, 'social sculpture'. The only concessions here to traditional notions about the form a work of art is supposed to



Inauguration of the Monument to Walther von der Vogelweide, Bolzano, 1889. Civic Archives, Bolzano.



Lucy + Jorge Orta 70 x 7 The Meal, act XVI Bolzano, 2002 Installation for 170 guests, piazza Walther, Bolzano Photo Andreas Marini



Lucy + Jorge Orta 70 x 7 The Meal, act XVI Bolzano, 2002 Installation for 170 guests, piazza Walther, Bolzano Photo Andreas Marini



Aleksandra Mir 'The How Not to Cookbook - Lessons learned the hard way', Launch Event, The Ross Band Stand, Princes Street Gardens - 05/08 / 09; Courtesy of the artist and Collective Gallery.

take is the appearance of the words 'aesthetics' and 'sculpture', but the context in which they are now used signals a set of expectations very different from those of conventional art discourse. Here the sculptor is not the maker of a thing but the organiser of a situation. His or her 'raw material' (the relevance of its being uncooked will become clear in a moment) is not any kind of physical stuff, but the actions and responses of the people who have been invited to take part in it, and on whose willingness to engage with it the success of the work will depend. The old binary distinction between the artist as a specialist producer of discrete objects, and the viewer as the one who encounters them in an environment conducive to detached aesthetic contemplation, has now all but dissolved; in fact the viewer, defined as a passive consumer of predetermined 'meaning', has been entirely supplanted by the participant, who is now an active agent in the production of that meaning.

Nor is it just aesthetic matters that are at issue here. The ambiguity inherent in the idea that engaging with art is a form of 'consumption' means that to challenge it is to open up a raft of new possibilities for social and political change, including the democratic empowerment of individuals and marginalized social groups, and the prospect of standing up to the relentless assault on public culture by the forces of consumer capitalism. Bourriaud's much-quoted claim that relational artists 'fill in the cracks in the social bond' sounds modest enough as an aspiration⁴. But behind it lies a much bigger agenda, and a more ambitious role for the new art as an agent of social transformation. For once, artists are not embarrassed by the idea that their work might actually do some good in the world in ways other than adding to its already overabundant stock of more or less beautiful objects. Such things merely take up space. What social sculpture proposes is that that space can be reclaimed for the purposes of conviviality and productive social transaction. The work, moreover, is not a representation of social interaction but an enactment of its myriad potentials. It is, in short, a microcosm of a more benign way of living.

The implications of this for commissioning are far from straight forward, but we might begin to map out the new potentials that arise from it by noting the degree to which relational projects often proceed by first assuming the form of an existing mode of organised social transaction. Bourriaud lists '[m]eetings, encounters, events, various types of collaboration between people, games [and] festivals' as among the most common of the ready-made contexts in which this cultural shape-shifting can occur⁵. There are many others he could have added, some of which will be familiar to the art community in Scotland, such as the interview (Nathan Coley's *Urban Sanctuary* of 1997)⁶ and the town hall rally (Ross Birrell's *Not Proven* 2001)⁷. He might even have included the process of commissioning a work of public art, and this is an idea we will have to consider in more detail later. For the moment, the main thing to note is that there is another familiar form of social ritual that he fails to mention, but which has proved to be by far the most productive as a template for social sculpture – the gathering of groups of people for the purposes of sharing food.

Eating does not have to be a social experience, but for most of us it usually is – whether in the casual domestic micro-ceremonies associated with breakfast and lunch, or the formalities of a dinner party with friends. When it is enacted on a more ambitious scale it becomes what we call a junket or a banquet or a feast, and if we have the good fortune of being able to speak Italian – that most euphonious of all the world's languages – we would refer to it as *un convivio*. The Latin roots from which this word is composed (*con* = with; *vivere* = to live) confirm the inherently social nature of such events, but the same prefix joined to the Latin word *pane* (= bread) gives us the even more resonant 'company', with its subtle implication that social relations derive their meaning ultimately from the sacramental act of the breaking and sharing of bread. Little wonder that the smell of steaming jasmine rice in the 303 Gallery in New York sent Rirkrit Tiravanija into such a delirium. 'As one sits down for the bowl . . . of food', he swoons, 'one begins to realize that this is a distinctively different experience from others we have had in an art gallery or with art'⁸. The work of art on this occasion was *untitled in parenthesis free*, and it is only one of many recent projects that have used the meal table as the site for choreographing the experiences of groups of participants that constitute the 'raw material' of a work of relational art. Many others could be cited, but perhaps the most ambitious of all to date has been Lucy Orta's *70 x 7 The Meal*, which was initiated in 2000 in Innsbruck, Switzerland, as a tribute to the miraculous social transformations achieved by the radical Colombian priest Padre Rafael Garcia Herreros in the deprived districts of Bogotá, and who used, among other things, 'benefit banquets' as a means of raising cash⁹.

There have been twenty meals in the *70 x 7* project so far, involving the participation of more than a thousand guests in a number of European cities, and there may well be more to come in the future. I do not know if Lucy Orta has any plans to stage one of these gastronomic marathons in Scotland – a Burns Supper would make an ideal pretext – but in the meantime a very similar example of eating-oriented social sculpture took place in Edinburgh this year (2009), and this provides us with an opportunity to examine the operations of this mode of practice, and the rhetoric associated with it, on a work made closer to home. It was, moreover, an event in which I myself played an incidental role, and, given that participation is the essence of such projects, this enables me to comment on it from, as it were, inside the work itself rather than as a detached critical observer. *How Not To Cook* was the result of a collaboration between the Collective Gallery, Edinburgh, and the Polish artist Aleksandra Mir, and was intended, among other things, to use the form of the public feast as a way to 'alter perceptions of both public art and public space'. The centrepiece of the project was the publication in August of *The How Not To Cookbook: Lessons learned the hard way*, a limited edition anthology of short statements on cooking



Aleksandra Mir 'The How Not to Cookbook - Lessons learned the hard way', Launch Event, The Ross Band Stand, Princes Street Gardens - 05/08 / 09; Courtesy of the artist and Collective Gallery.



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Aleksandra Mir 'The How Not to

by 1000 contributors from around the world ¹⁰. The democratic and egalitarian aspirations that are evident in the inclusion of contributions from anyone prepared to offer one also extends to the theme of the book itself, which celebrates the familiar phenomenon of the 'cooking disaster', and the all-too-human failures that we experience on a more or less regular basis in our efforts to produce something edible in the kitchen. A beautifully produced parody of Alice Waters' classic recipe book *The Art of Simple Food*, it inverts our normal expectations of such publications by documenting the multitude of ways in which even the simplest culinary operations can go wrong.

The book, however, was only one component in a much more extended project, and the only part of it that conforms to the conventional expectation that a public artwork must be embodied in a permanent physical form. Significantly, it was also the only aspect of the commission for which Mir herself took responsibility ¹¹. The programme of related events that accompanied it, the details of which will follow in a moment, was developed entirely on the initiative of the gallery staff, and the fact that these are all practising artists themselves raises the interesting possibility that the process of commissioning is itself the work of art. It was certainly through these, rather than through the book, that the quintessentially relational understanding of cooking and eating as sites of social exchange was most fully and convincingly enacted. And this is where my own direct experience of the work becomes relevant. The curtain-raiser for the project was a 'Potluck Dinner', held in the Community Centre, Portobello, in April. By my estimation the event was attended by at least 100 people, all of whom (apart from me) brought with them several dishes of home-made food, which were laid out on a long table at the side, and from which everyone could pick and choose to make up their own meal. The evening was structured around a modest programme of talks and performances, including an illustrated lecture by me in which I took the opportunity to voice a few personal hang-ups about the newly problematised relationship between the private and the public in urban spaces, and the emasculation of public discourse by the increasing penetration of mobile technology into civic life. As an embodiment of organised conviviality, and as an event that involved the free exchange of good things among friends and strangers alike, the meal was a powerful gesture of resistance to what I tried to argue was the slow but relentless process by which post-industrial capitalism is transforming the city into a habitat in which the citizen has no place and only the consumer can thrive.

In the weeks that followed, the theme of cooking as a means of generating positive social relations was developed through a range of similar initiatives, including a programme of cooking workshops with the members of the homeless charity Streetworks Edinburgh and a masterclass with the chef Martin Wishart, the outcome of which was a picnic in the normally inaccessible Queen Street Gardens in the New Town. All the while the stories were accumulating and being recorded, with more to follow when the Collective staff made a series of forays into 'community centres, residential homes, schools, history clubs, restaurants, canteens and shops in an attempt to access advice from the very worst of the cookery flops, burns, explosions and spats' ¹². The culmination of the whole project was another mob event, this time in West Princes Street Gardens, where the book was launched to the accompaniment of more speeches and performances (by, among others, the poet John Hegley) and the cooking of an omelette of monstrous dimensions. Under the slogan 'Break It To Make It', the participants were invited to crack open one of the 600 eggs that went into the mix to secure the right to eat their share. Once the post-event clean-up had been completed, the copies of *The How Not To Cookbook* that had not already been collected or sold were returned to the gallery and displayed in specially constructed units in the small space adjacent to the reception area. Visually, this was an impressive spectacle, with shelf after shelf of identical black volumes looking for all the world like a corner from Jorg Luis Borges' Library of Babel. From then on the numbers slowly began to dwindle as copies were posted out to the contributors who were unable to make it to Princes Street Gardens.

A brief description like this of the events that together constituted *How Not To Cook* gives some idea of how the project was structured and the organisational energies that were required to make it happen. But it reveals very little of what really matters – the quality of the participants' experiences, and the degree to which their lives were changed by their transient involvement with it. I am not sure if there is any reliable way of determining such things, other than by the informal judgements people spontaneously volunteer when they have had a good (or bad) time, and from what I can gather the feedback on this has been almost wholly positive. All the same it would be a useful exercise for somebody to sit down and quantify the actual number of people *in total* who were touched by the project in some way. And that means not just the 1000 contributors to the book, the several hundred potluck diners and egg-crackers who attended the main events and all those who signed up for the various workshops, but the multitude of other people who were drawn into it by agreeing to provide information or materials or a service of some kind. These would include the staff at the libraries, schools and shops who were approached for stories, the owners of local businesses who were sweet-talked into providing sponsorship in kind, the army personnel who erected the marquees at Princes Street Gardens, the organic farmers from the Borders who supplied the mountain of free-range eggs without charging a penny and the wee guy who turned up clanking a bunch of keys to let the picnickers into the fenced-off gardens in Queen Street. None of these was forced to become involved, but the fact that they did suggests that there was something about the project that fired their imagination and convinced them that it would bring them some intangible but real benefit. They were what could be described as the project's 'collateral beneficiaries' (to turn an obnoxious military

Cookbook - Lessons learned the hard way', Porty Pot Luck Dinner - 18/04/09; Courtesy of the artist and Collective Gallery.



Aleksandra Mir 'The How Not to Cookbook - Lessons learned the hard way', Porty Pot Luck Dinner - 18/04/09; Courtesy of the artist and Collective Gallery.

expression against itself), and, as in all genuine works of social sculpture, it is in the circles of contingent interaction that radiate from the core of the work that its true meaning and value resides.

As a commission, *How Not To Cook* clearly differs radically from the processes through which conventional works of public art like the *Big Heids* are normally produced. Nevertheless, in the same way that Art in Partnership, the commissioning agency for that piece, were answerable to their clients and funding bodies, so the Collective Gallery will be required to demonstrate that their work with Aleksandra Mir satisfied whatever agreed criteria of excellence are appropriate to a work of this kind. They will also have to show that it provided – dare I say it – ‘value for money’. The money in this case came mostly from the SAC, and presumably a report will eventually be submitted to them, providing a clear and self-critical analysis of the project’s strengths and weaknesses. This is a tough call at the best of times, but with a work that takes as its ‘material’ the subjective experiences of a loosely defined and transient multitude of independent individuals the problems are clearly much more daunting.

For what it is worth I can record that my own brief engagement with the project was enjoyable and satisfying; it brought all the pleasures that come with the privilege of being listened to by an alert and (apparently) receptive audience, followed by as much good food as I could eat, some lively conversation and a couple of welcome beers as I sat back to enjoy Ian Moore’s hilarious stand-up routine. And yet on my way home that evening I found myself wondering if what I had experienced had been any different from I would normally expect from any event that combined work with social pleasure in this way. Like more or less everyone I know in my profession, I accept invitations to speaking engagements on a regular basis. More often than not the ‘work’ component is embedded in a pattern of social rituals that involves food and drink, conversation, striking up new acquaintances and making professional contacts, all of which really do change my life in all manner of subtle and unquantifiable ways. It never occurred to me that there was any ‘art’ in this other than in the subject of my discourse.

Let me be clear. I regard the emergence of relational art as one of the most important cultural developments in recent times, and I am proud to have had a minor part to play in a work as imaginative and ambitious as *How Not To Cook*. And yet as a practice, social sculpture is clearly vulnerable to objection on a number of levels, and unless we are prepared to suspend our critical faculties, and accept the evaluation placed on it by its own proponents, it is difficult to avoid a cynical response to the claims that are sometimes made for it. Members of groups like the Women’s Institute and the Rotary Club, who spend most of their leisure time organising coffee mornings, jumble sales, bus trips and sweepstakes as an extension of their desire to improve the lives of others, would split their sides laughing at the sheer pretentiousness of the claims made by Bourriaud and Larsen and Tiravajina that serving up pots of rice to a couple of dozen art groupies is going to change the world. Hal Foster puts his finger on the problem here when he describes much relational art as being ‘remedial work in socialisation’, a facile invitation by the artist to ‘come and play, talk and learn with me’ ¹³.

So is it any wonder that the history of relational art is strewn with embarrassing failures? Benign intentions are never enough, as Dan Graham discovered when he installed his notorious *Belgian Funhouse*, a stainless steel and (bullet-proof!) glass construction that has been memorably described as a ‘green cobweb bus-stop pissoire looking thing’ in Antwerp in 1998 with the intention that it would ‘encourage social and human interaction and engagement’ ¹⁴. This is a work that so misjudged the mood of the demographic group it was intended to benefit that they decided to undertake some ‘remedial’ work of their own, vandalising it so badly that it had to be removed and is now in quarantine in a (believe it) sculpture park in the grounds of the Middelheim Museum on the outskirts of town. Apparently what enraged the work’s potential beneficiaries was not just the condescension implicit in the very idea that their lives needed to be improved in this way, but the fact that it had been commissioned by the local authority with no consultation and paid for with what was effectively their own money. The cost has been conservatively estimated at 18 million Belgian Francs, the equivalent of 450,000 Euros ¹⁵.

I doubt if *How Not To Cook* will ever attract this kind of vilification – its playfulness and the lightness of its touch effectively forestall any such hostile response. And yet this does not put it beyond criticism, and it is important that we are honest in recognising its limitations. Ironically, it is *The How Not To Cookbook* – the only tangible object that remains from the episode – that is the project’s weakest element. It is a beautifully produced publication, to be sure, but production values are no substitute for content, and much of content in this case is very poor indeed. For one thing the book is not, strictly speaking, what it claims to be. It is not a manual on how not to cook – which might have been a genuinely interesting and subversive exercise – but a guide to how we can improve our own cooking by avoiding the mistakes made by others. Many of the tips it provides seem hardly worth the paper they are printed on, ranging from such fatuous would-be aphorisms as: ‘Do not throw out bread. It can be used for breadcrumbs’, to the witless vulgarity of: ‘Do not fry a sausage when you have a boner’ ¹⁶. It has also been asserted that the anthology, because of the unusual way in which it has been compiled, ‘toys with our notions of authorship and authenticity’ ¹⁷. Does anybody seriously believe this? I have at home a book of gardening tips that has been put together in pretty much the same way, but I am not aware that any grandiose, Roland Barthes-approved death-of-the-author status has been professed for this. No, you ‘toy with notions of authorship’ by writing *Tristram Shandy*, not by cobbling together a scrapbook of limited culinary and even less literary merit.

And there are other problems. If the book – the closest thing to a recognisable work of art the project has to offer – is so deficient, it seems reasonable to ask where else the aesthetic content of the work might be located. What distinguishes the other components – or the work as a totality – from the Women’s Institute



Lucy + Jorge Orta 70 x 7 The Meal, act XVI Bolzano, 2002 Installation for 170 guests, piazza Walther, Bolzano Photo Andreas Marini



Lucy + Jorge Orta 70 x 7 The Meal, act XVI Bolzano, 2002 Installation for 170 guests, piazza Walther, Bolzano Photo Andreas Marini

picnics I mentioned earlier? The elegance of the project's overall conception? Or the critical incisiveness of the posture it strikes in the current discourse of art? Whether we refer to the category of practice it belongs to as 'relational aesthetics' or 'social sculpture', there is an implicit promise in each that the artistic content traditionally associated with creative activities in general, and with sculpture in particular, has not been dispensed with but merely reconfigured, and that the experiences they engender will satisfy the demand for aesthetic content in some other way.

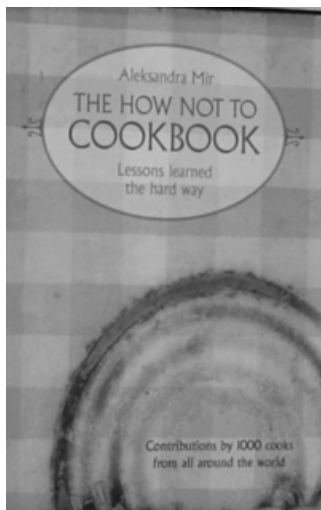
For all the genuine sympathy I feel towards the project I cannot in honesty say that I know how this conundrum can be resolved. Perhaps it is not a conundrum at all, and I am not even sure Aleksandra Mir would feel any obligation to defend the work against a line of criticism such as this. Nevertheless, I would like to conclude with an attempt to articulate what I see as the fundamental dilemma of relational art by approaching it in a slightly more oblique way. At the start of this article I mentioned Lucy Orta's *70 x 7 The Meal*, which consisted of a sequence of twenty banquets that took place in various European locations over several years. The numbers in the title refer to the method used to recruit the participants, with the fourteen guests who attended the first meal returning with six of their own friends for the second, who then brought their friends to the next one and so on. According to Maia Damionovic, this not only gave the work its performative continuity¹⁸ but also enabled it to 'exist as a viable part of social reality, not just as a static object set up for public edification'¹⁹. The fact that she describes it in this way is interesting because at the meal that took place in Bolzano, in the Italian Tyrol, on 7 June 2002, the tables were arranged in a circle round precisely one such static object – the colossal marble statue of Walther von der Vogelweide, which stands in the centre the Piazza Walther, the town's main square²⁰. In the Phaidon monograph on Orta's work there are two photographs of the square taken from the same viewpoint, one of them showing the banquet in full swing, the other with the tables empty and the square almost deserted²¹. It is difficult to tell if the latter was taken before the guests had arrived or after they had all gone home. I suspect it was the former, but in many ways this is not the relevant issue. What is striking about the juxtaposition of the two pictures is the powerful sense of 'continuity' created by the presence of the monument. People come and go; the monument endures. This probably sounds as though I am limbering up for a defence of all the reactionary values the new practices are supposed to have displaced – permanence, monumentality, aesthetic impact, the skill of the maker and all the rest – but this is not what I am trying to do at all. What I *am* trying to do is suggest that the debate need not be as crudely polarised as this, and that these two different ways of understanding public art might not be quite as incompatible as they seem.



Aleksandra Mir 'The How Not to Cookbook - Lessons learned the hard way', Installation view at Collective; Courtesy of the artist and Collective Gallery.

Let me explain it in this way. Part of Lucy Orta's strategy at these events is to direct the conversation that is generated at the table by indicating topics for discussion on the underside of the diners' plates²². (Another example, perhaps, of the artist 'toying with our notions of authorship'?) I did not, alas, have the good fortune to be a guest at the Bolzano meal, but if I had been there I know what I would have wanted to discuss. Indeed, as a living component of a 'social sculpture' I would have insisted on debating the relationship between myself and the marble effigy of a dead man in fancy dress looking down on me from on high. So my poor fellow diners would have been regaled with an improvised monologue on the statue and the historical figure it represents. They would have learnt that Walther von der Vogelweide was a thirteenth-century itinerant musician and lyric poet who made a living travelling around southern Germany performing at banquets not so very different from the one we were participating in ourselves. The fact that I knew (and still know) almost nothing of the circumstances in which the monument was commissioned, other than the fact that it was erected in 1889, would have been no deterrent. (I would have had several glasses of wine by this time, and besides, half of the fun of this type of situation is the opportunity it gives me to trot out a farrago of made-up bullshit disguised as an authoritative disquisition.) The point is, however, that I know enough about the *general practice* of commissioning at the time it was erected to be able to sketch a rough outline of how it probably – I would say almost certainly – occurred.

So for those of my fellow diners who were prepared to sit it out, they would have heard a story that went something like this. The whole process owed its origin to a collective decision by the people of Bolzano that the historical figure of Walther von der Vogelweide was sufficiently important to their identity as an urban community to warrant the effort and expense of paying tribute to him in stone. A public meeting was called, the outcome of which was the appointment of an executive committee charged with the task of raising the necessary readies and finding an artist as eminent as they could afford. The fundraising would have taken any one or all of a number of tried and tested forms: benefit concerts, jumble sales, coffee mornings, flag days and door-to-door visits by volunteers rattling cans, with regularly updated subscription lists published in the local press. The sculptor was almost certainly chosen through a limited competition in which half a dozen hand-picked artists were invited to submit small terra-cotta maquettes, which were displayed in the public library with voting slips to enable the townspeople to have their say in the choice of the winning design. Even when this had been decided, the executive committee reserved the right to demand alterations if they thought the left arm was too long, or the treatment of the costume too fussy or if there were any other details they found unsatisfactory. Once all this had been sorted, the sculptor – whose name, incidentally, was Heinrich Natter (1844-1892) – retreated to the privacy of his studio and, with a small army of assistants, got to work chiselling the features of the great man. During this time, which could have lasted anything between eighteen months and three years, the locals busied themselves with the problem of finding a suitable site – a process that proved to be a lot more contentious than they expected – and then resolving the complex legal difficulties that always arise when one interest group wants to do something that will permanently and conspicuously change the appearance of a space that belongs to everybody.



Aleksandra Mir 'The How Not to Cookbook - Lessons learned the hard way', cover (detail)



Aleksandra Mir 'The How Not to Cookbook - Lessons learned the hard way', Installation view at Collective; Courtesy of the artist and Collective Gallery.



Aleksandra Mir 'The How Not to Cookbook - Lessons learned the hard way', Installation view at Collective; Courtesy of the artist and Collective Gallery.

As the day scheduled for the delivery of the completed statue approaches, the tension in the town becomes palpable. The deadline is looming, but there is still a multitude of things to do: the site has to be prepared, the pedestal built and a cage erected for the canvas that will conceal the statue until the unveiling takes place, and on top of that there are all the logistical headaches that come with getting the invitations out on time and to the right people. Finally the big day arrives. The turnout from the local people is the most impressive in living memory – almost the entire population of the town in fact – but to the amazement and relief of the organisers it all goes off without a hitch. There is a brass band, a children's choir and a parade of workers' guilds, as well as speeches from the Lord Mayor and a local history teacher who has been rummaging in the town archives for documentary proof that Walther was indeed the greatest Tyrolean poet of the late middle ages. The cheering that accompanies the moment when the covering slides to the ground to reveal the statue in all its dazzling newness – the marble visibly sparkles in the sunlight – is deafening and prolonged, and even after the ceremony is officially concluded the square remains thronged with people gazing up in wonderment at a representation of their hero that is so convincingly real it might have been the man himself raised from the dead. Later that evening there is a massive banquet to which everyone is invited.

By now, most of the people on my table have drifted away to join other groups, but the few remaining who have not dozed off seem to be genuinely interested to hear that the statue was regarded as politically off-message by the Fascists, who dismantled it and banished it to a park on the edge of the town, and that it was not until 1984 that it was returned to the square that now bears the poet's name. More than anything they are amazed that something that looks so permanent – so much a part of the physical fabric of the place – has had such a peripatetic existence. But they are now beginning to realise that, even in the context of monumental public art, permanence is a relative term. A public monument is not only a 'moveable feast' – how apposite Hemmingway's phrase is in this context – but is subject to the same laws of transience and entropic decay as anything else in this world. 'Real' sculptures pass away as surely as any examples of the 'social' variety: they just take a little longer.

Looking again at the photographs of the Bolzano project – the before and after images – I find myself wondering if the two works depicted in them are really so different from each other. Conviviality and social pleasure were present in the inception of Heinrich Natter's work every bit as much as in Lucy Orta's, and like *70 x 7 The Meal*, the statue of Walther embodies a desire to inscribe social continuity in a public form. If the events leading up to and accompanying the inauguration of the statue in 1889 were anything like the speculative description of them I have offered here, they would appear to be alarmingly similar to the celebration that took place around it on the evening of 7 June 2002. Perhaps it could be argued, as I tried to do for *How Not To Cook*, that the commissioning process that led to the creation of the statue was the real artwork, not the physical representation of the poet. But there is one important difference: the statue remains to this day where it was when the meal took place, and will probably still be there next time Lucy Orta (or Aleksandra Mir or anybody else for that matter) chooses to stage another eating-orientated social sculpture – another *convivio* – around its base. We know that large numbers of Edinburgh and Portobello folk benefited from the bold and imaginative enterprise that was *How Not To Cook*. But I think the people of Bolzano got the better deal.

¹ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Dijon, 1998. English translation by Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods, 2002.

² Clare Bishop (ed.), *Participation*, London, 2006.

³ Lars Bang Larsen, *Social Aesthetics*, in *ibid.*, pp. 172-83.

⁴ Bourriaud, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁶ Francis McKee (ed.), *Urban Sanctuary: a public art work by Nathan Coley*, Stills Gallery, Edinburgh, n.d. 1997.

⁷ This project began as a proposal for a series of night classes and televised concerts in the newly opened Scottish Parliament in 2000 and became *Not Proven* after the idea was rejected by the then Presiding Officer, David Steel. See Ross Birrell and Alec Finlay (eds), *Justified Sinners: an archaeology of Scottish counter-culture (1960-2000)*, Edinburgh and Glasgow, 2002, n.p.

⁸ Rirkrit Tiravanija, 'No Ghosts in the Wall', in Bishop, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

⁹ Roberto Pinto, Nicolas Bourriaud and Maia Damianovic, *Lucy Orta*, London and New York, 2003, p. 92.

¹⁰ Aleksandra Mir, *The How Not To Cook Book: Lessons learned the hard way*, Collective Gallery, Edinburgh, 2009.

¹¹ Conversation with Jenny Richards, Collective Gallery, Edinburgh, 23 September 2009.

¹² Collective Gallery, Edinburgh, information leaflet 'Launch Event: 05/08/09' n.p. [p.3]

¹³ Hal Foster, 'Chat Rooms', in Bishop, *op. cit.*, p. 194.

¹⁴ Douglas Park, 'Inside story about Cel Crabeel's exposé of Dan Graham's 'Belgian Funhouse' as partial

insight into the author's own work', <http://www.slashseconds.org/issues/003/002/articles/dpark/index.php>

¹⁵ Information provided by Cel Crabeels, correspondence 13 October 2009. It seems likely that the 450k euros was only for the construction costs and that the artist's fee of 200k euros was added to this.

¹⁶ Mir, op. cit., pp. 16 & 65.

¹⁷ Rosalie Doubal, *Is This Collaboration?*, <http://www.publicartscotland.com/reflections/35>

¹⁸ Pinto *et al.*, p. 95.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

²⁰ Correspondence with Dr Hannes Obermair, Head of Bolzano Civic Archives, 7 October 2009.

²¹ Pinto *et al.*, p. 94.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 97.

Comments

12 Feb 2010

Matt Baker

I found this an incredibly honest and useful article on contemporary practice – the underlying discussion of what commissioning means in our age however seemed rather overlooked by Andrew Guest in his summing up comment.

The title – ‘How Not to Commission’ reaches to the heart of one of the key issues for practice in public ie who is commissioning and why. On one hand, we live in a democracy, on the other we are still dealing with the aftershock of the Enlightenment which gave primacy to the idea of the artist as an autonomous ‘genius’ responsible for developing both their own agenda and means of expressing such (as opposed to the previous version whereby the artist exercised their own talent as part of a collaborative web involving patrons, peers and craftspeople).

Works like Aleksandra Mir’s ‘How Not to Cook’ are commissioned by Galleries or Arts organisations. As such their primary objective is centred on the artist realising ‘their’ vision. More often than not the artist is aiming the impact of their work at ‘artworld’ rather than what might be more generally considered a ‘public’ audience. In this form of practice the public become ‘part of the work’ as form of material for the artist to manipulate towards the final effect. What I mean here is that there is no a-priori assumption that the reality of involvement in the work will result in a profound experience for the participants – rather what is important is the skill with which the artist manipulated their participation into a work for ‘artworld consumption’.

Public money is often drawn into such projects and justified under the heading of Education (I suspect this may be what funded the meals that Ray MacKenzie attended) often the thrust of this part of the project is education – about the artist and their process – and hence the whole thing becomes a self-serving short circuit that does little to develop a creative relationship between art and the public.

It is always deeply risky to generalise from individual examples and to risk that further – I worked on a project with Mir in Glasgow in 2000. During this, the public had the temerity to initiate a debate with the artist about the context of the work. Aleksandra Mir immediately walked out of the project with the parting words that – ‘we should all think very carefully before involving artists in this sort of project in the future’. It seemed that her understanding was that the role of the arts team was to realise her vision rather than support her in a process of negotiation with the context of the place.

If this extreme of the contemporary commissioning landscape could be defined as ‘things done to the public for the benefit of art’ then its opposite would be ‘things done to the public by commissioners with art’. This is when money is raised for ‘art’ but the objective is not to make art but rather to ‘regenerate’, ‘commemorate’ or ‘decorate’. (I’ll leave commemoration and decoration as part of an older and possibly parallel tradition). Regeneration or ‘art having a social benefit’ is a phenomenon that historically shadows the Enlightenment genius-artist and the two have reached this extraordinary combustible state in this era of people power and user-generated content.

The Commissioner who commissions ‘art’ for regeneration often begins with the same approach as the gallery commissioned Artist – a set of tools and an idea of the audience that they wish to make an impact upon. Here the tool is the artist and the impact is desired upon a public ie the desire is not to make art as such but rather an effect.

It could be argued that this was the reality of commissioning the statue that Ray Mackenzie describes in the Italian square that was used for Lucy Orta’s project. The difference for me is in the checks and balances that are at work in negotiating ‘consent’ for the work at every level were fundamentally

different in 19th Century Italy to the way that public space is controlled in our democratic age. We have become incredibly bad at making communication between "strategy level" and "grassroots" ie people with power to make decisions about place and people who have a day to day stake in those places.

With the advent of Environmental and Context-Specific art practice artists have become incredibly skilled at negotiating channels of communication across the strata of a given situation. There is potentially a socially valuable and artistically significant fit between the Environmental artist and the public commission " the key issue is one of TIME. It is useless to appoint an artist on the basis of a "proposal" made without the benefit of research time equally the artist will need sufficient time and support to unpick the agendas surrounding a project and work at a fundamental level of education at all levels of the context (including the commissioning team). It is this we must strive for if art in public is to play the part it can in building a more humane society through creative engagement with place and people.

I feel it may be time for those of us who are passionate about art in public space to start to unpick the commissioning context and work to alter the "contract" which artists are offered in making work in public.

This may entail taking some tough decisions that categorise work like "How Not to Cook" as interesting "gallery practice" " but irrelevant to any discussion of "environmental or public practice"?

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15 Dec 2009
Andrew Guest

Ray McKenzie makes an excellent job of putting current 'situationist' or "community-based" art practice into both a historical and intellectual context, which he presents with his characteristic breadth of knowledge and depth of feeling. To try and summarise his extended argument, it seems to me that he proposes two completely different readings of such work. The first is that the commissioning process itself can be deemed the work of art, rather than the "product" that results from this process. (This reading has obvious parallels with the relationship of the idea to the product in conceptual art). The second is that whilst the situation (the meal, the event, or the response of those who take part) provides the content of such work, the creation of such events by artists or commissioners can express a top-down, hierarchical, "this will be good for you" attitude, just as much as works like the M8 "Big Heids". In a society without a naturally strong or active community, events such as the Potluck Dinner he describes can be created by those who wish it on us. But as he implies in his closing words, neither of these readings makes this kind of work seem like a substitute for the real thing.

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