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Public Art u need, Public Art for all, Public Art as boycott: directions in artists' responses to the present state of public art in the UK

1.

The existence of a florid market for public art would like to stand as a self-sustaining guarantee of its need, its validity, its value, and the acknowledgement of the generic mechanisms onto which it rests. Everyone involved in this conference -myself included- has a degree of relationship to that market, from participation at some level or another to mere spectatorship. I, on my part, as an artist have more or less actively, more or less visibly, played a part in the midst of this condition, but being only an occasionally appointed operator rather than a planner of cultural strategies I have ducked and dived above and below the directives sent in my path, like a foot soldier attempting to dodge friendly-fire bullets and survive.

In between the extremes of complete evacuation and wholehearted embrace of the opportunities offered or the production/curation of self-initiated project looking for funding, most of us operate in a fragile strip of freedom; at every turn evaluating, negotiating and when necessary challenging the inevitable and overlapping acts of appropriation engendered by the fact of working in the public realm.

In a paper entitled 'Sloganeering'⁽¹⁾, Dave Beech tactically takes a stance, deciding to bypass all other question about public art, and to go straight at the subject of 'what public art does?' But also, I would add another equally important question to be addressed at the outset of every specific project and location: 'why public art?' or in other terms: 'what are the reasons or justification given by institutions and individuals attending to the planning or delivery of artistic activities within existing social systems and in particular within urban regeneration projects?' If the question posed by Beech, wants to tease an invisible and general ideology out of public art, my question aims to tackle specific moments in time and space framed by overarching conditions, through a survey of what is openly laid out in front of us, play it back to itself and observe the slippages between mapping and territory.

The many official responses to this rhetorical question are well known to all of us involved, whilst they remain largely invisible in their crude reality to the 'public' of public art who sees its appearances and materialisations as some kind of spontaneous occurrence, a state of partial ignorance which seals its assessment of the work only in the terms and criteria laid out by its own system of dissemination and marketing. It is a therefore a public 'engineered' by the work as much as making the work in a social sense, even when participation or engagement are offered to some of its individual constituents.

My attempt throughout the course of this paper will be to see how the climate created by those used and abused responses to the 'Why?' question has generated some tactical artists' reaction to this climate, ranging in between embracing, bypassing, exploiting or antagonising.

2.

There is a lot of anxious energy in the world of public art at present but there is also a lot of activity, all of which seems to send signals of a cultural phenomena at some kind of peak, like a market on the edge of a bubble-bursting event, or maybe simply of a transient threshold, ushering either a new hybridized expansion of the same old way of doing things or instead some more radical restructuring imposed for example by an ongoing reform of the planning system in UK and the leverages it provides to public art as a cultural tertiary industry. But there is also a history of resilience to trauma that is typical of public art, and the sense that the strategic importance of its functions will always override any serious overhauling; a reminder perhaps that the main responsibility and ultimate loci of change in public art resides in the artists, their capacity of resisting the 'tyranny of

empathy'⁽²⁾ of advocates, administrators, canvassers, bureaucrats and all those professing to love 'public art', as well as in the strength of their resolution to stretch the current limits of what is legitimate to demand to public art in its articulations.

Perennially scorned in some quarters, firmly established in others camps, constantly and necessarily re-discovered and repackaged into new terms, but definitely growing in budget and opportunities, this is the rather homogeneous status quo at the boundaries between -crudely speaking- art and its use as a cultural tool for the political management of economic expansion and land regeneration by public and private agents alike or - in a more poetic version- another episode in the constant redefinition of the permeable boundaries between art and life, art and non-art, autonomy and heteronomy of the system of art.

Boris Groys, for example, believes that: *'In the modern world the artistic avant-garde functions as an economic avant-garde, or, if you want, as an ersatz aristocracy of a society organised on the basis of economics – an "artificial" aristocracy whose whole social function consists in the stretching farther and farther the limits of what can be desired.'*⁽³⁾

An idea echoed also by some prominent artists, like Mark Wallinger, when back in 2000, long before the Fourth Plinth and the awarding of the Turner Prize, as guest editor of the publication 'Art for All: their policies, our culture', stated in his preface: *'Art is the new rock'n'roll. Art is for everyone. Art is the opium of the people.'*⁽⁴⁾

Within the same publication, the artist known as Bob & Roberta Smith, also contributed an entry in the form of a postcard: *'Most artists are independently wealthy 'fat cats' who do not deserve or need Public Money! Arts Council money should go into educative and Public Arts projects to encourage those who are not so middle-class on to think of going to Art School to make art and be creative. Conservative Arts Policy was far worse.'*⁽⁵⁾ The new position of art institutions within the interconnectedness of state, local and private funding, means that art exists in the 'system/life world' –whether they are still distinguishable one from the other is another point of discussion- not merely through the production, custody, ordering and presentation of discrete objects –although it does all of these on a global scale - but also and very importantly through its relations with capital, through spatial articulations within urban development, particular relationships with economic investments and the social processes engendered by these. This is what Julian Stallabrass calls: *'the regulation and incorporation of art in a new world order.'*⁽⁶⁾

This also means that within the pervading discussions on the instrumentality of public funding, an often forgotten feature must be the increased potential of the contemporary system of art to be capable, willing and perfectly placed to performs 'self-instrumental' uses of its own currency in order to negotiate its growth in between other urban development actors, corroborated by a cachet of statistics related to cultural tourism that command a previously unseen level of respect in urban spatial politics. Again from Stallabrass: *'the uses to which art is put, and the identity of those who use it, are often far from mysterious. Since the fall of Eastern European communism and the emergence of capitalism as a truly global system, these uses have become both more advanced and more evident.'*⁽⁷⁾

3.

The current UK cultural policy and the basis for its financial support to the arts is clearly set upon a conditional 'investment' in the arts -not a subsidy- giving centre-stage to ancillary benefits of artistic activities rather than the value of the art as 'transformative' in itself a sufficient enough reason for

supporting it in its various forms.

With hands-off philanthropism being a thing of the past it would be however a moot point to slip into a dangerous debate between 'instrumental' vs. 'intrinsic' value of the arts. So much of the valuable space for such debates is lost within positions, posturing and exploitation of this old chestnut: if you lean towards the intrinsic you are an old-style elitist, and if you accept instrumental value you are a populist and a philistine. What is subdued in the depth of the impasse caused by such easily polarised positions is the anachronism of its tone. I would suggest is much more appropriate to look at art's inherent ambivalence as inescapable; its placement within the social sphere – where art does not have an agreed unequivocal function- only enhance its peculiar status which is at once heteronymous in its empirical existence and relatively autonomous in its normative principle.

Instead, what is the most strikingly pathological aspect of the current justifications for funding the arts in UK, or the adoption of public art in particular, is that, in a pure 'third way' fashion, they attempt to accommodate quite predictable, well-tested and plain instrumental 'uses' of public art (attracting investments and improving the economy, city status and branding opportunities), with a clumsily concealed embrace of the universalist rhetoric of 'intrinsic' values of art. How is this possible? By subjecting the discourses around the 'transformative properties of art' derived from Aristotle onwards, to a prescriptive 'transformation' via a list of demands regarding social outcomes for the work itself, presented as bullet points with the zeal of the progressive reformist. Or as John Holden writes: *'the tail is wagging the dog'*.⁽⁸⁾ The 'intrinsic as instrumental' became entwined together into differentiated delivery of objectives cut and pasted from templates propagated across bodies, institutions and individuals and accepted as meaningful.

4.

But whilst the term 'art' has grown in currency and continues to associate itself to anything it can stick its name on in surprising synergies on this planet and beyond⁽⁹⁾, the term 'public art' has suffered some drawbacks and self-erasures, despite the exponential growth of its activities.

The literal face-lift that many public art agencies have undergone in their removal of the term 'public art' from their name can be a sign of a momentous desire to do away with a contentious historical legacy despite formal changes in the work done, a model clearly absorbed by business practices enamoured with mergers and mysterious sounding new 'brand' names:

Public Art Commissioning Agency	into	MODUS OPERANDI
Public Art Forum	into	IXIA
Public Arts	into	BEAM
Public Art Wales/CBAT	into	SAFLE

Whether is the creation of a new 'cultural quarter', an urban regeneration project of any size, or an educational program of a major gallery, in UK all of these activities are nowadays unthinkable without their corollary public art programme, and whether the administrative distribution of the available budgets is directly conducted by either public, private or public/private bodies, or by the strategically positioned agencies and consultancies, the constant stream of funds provided by the conditional 'investment' in the arts inscribed in policies, makes sure that existing budget are consumed.

But the exponential growth of budgets available and the rising amount of opportunities offered, hides other less positive aspects, mostly perceived in the unease and dichotomy experienced by some artists, uncertain as how to respond to



McDonagh Tower demolition, Ballymun, Dublin, 2003

the insidious gaps opened between the offerings on the plate and the terms built within those offerings. One thing is to accept the indeterminacy that any insertion in the public sphere is subjected to because of the negotiation of social differences always in progress, another is to accept the determination a priori investing a public artwork of specific and determining function affecting its reception; in either cases a degree of instrumentalisation is in place. Whereas in the former this is an accepted risk, in the latter it is a certainty.

The main challenge for those in charge of public art commissions and opportunities, particularly in regeneration, would appear to demonstrate whether they can do anything more than gesturing by shifting from one dominant type of object-based, large sculptural output (10), to a more directly participatory, cheaper, friendly, amicable, unassuming type of work, which ticks both the box that assuage the vociferous art constituency in its demands to align public art output with contemporary practices, as well as the box which make sure that at least the public involved and counted for the record, 'understands' the work done and will not complain afterwards.

These stylistic adjustments have more than often fulfilled even more closely the cultural policies agenda, importing for example the relentless critique of the sculptural object in public, both internal to the system of art as well as coming from some quarters of public response, to the point that such rejection is now in itself a point of value of what is produced in public art.

To say that a contemporary public art programme is an 'antidote to large scale iconic art' (11), means cashing in a higher cultural currency in the contemporary climate of public art, a transition which has hardly affected in any way the uses or functions for which public art is produced or its volume of production but only increasing the variety of offerings and the shelf space of cultural tools available to curators, officers and administrators of large regeneration budgets.

Moreover, what seems absent from the current scene is the potential for public art projects that rather than always and necessarily being demanded to tease positive images and values out of involvement with 'deprived' communities, might instead instigate a rethinking of the large masterplans out of which the available budgets for public art originated, fostering a circular

redistribution of power shares which Tim Collins aptly describes as a 'part Habermasian-part Foucauldian' approach to power.

5. As a substitute, beacon or decoy for community involvement or consultation in urban regeneration projects less than favourably received by many sectors of a community, certain types of relational, community-centred, temporary public art have certainly done wonders for those in need of their services, but the question is for how long it can continue to do so without the marketing and PR advantages of such strategies turning into overt public confrontations over their claims. Maybe in those confrontations lies the power of public art that is capable of 'negotiating social differences', rather than always 'curing social ills'.

An interesting item to observe in the next few years to gauge the level of this debate will be the rolling out of the recently published public art strategy of the ODA, the Olympic Delivery Authority for the London 2012 Olympics, which will become active in the next four years, and will be steered by a committee chaired by the ex-executive director of the ACE. Propelled by the begrudged reduction of ACE funds diverted to the Olympics, but also by the mirage of a redistribution through specifically related funds later on, the regeneration juggernaut of the Lower Lea Valley promises to be a contentious territory to test up to which point artists are oblivious, forgiving or careless to the social and political conditions that enable their opportunities to exist.

The strategy, in a pure cut and paste fashion, aims to: Create a new sense of place and belonging for local communities;

Attract new businesses and residents to the area;

Create a world-class visitor destination;

Contribute to the social and cultural regeneration of the area.

And recommendations include:

Working with partners, act as a catalyst to set up an ambitious, pioneering arts-led community engagement programme of the highest quality.

Quite a stance for an organisation whose achievements up to date includes the forced 'decanting' of the local community,

the tabula rasa of all built and natural environment, the concentration of all its efforts strictly within the Olympic zone, leaving untouched the far more problematic centre town of Stratford and having the effect of propelling upwards the cost of local properties to the point that a newly built one-bedroom flat overlooking the future Olympic park is over £300,000 in an area of London until recently the preferred choice of newly arrived immigrants, middle-class in retreat or slowly upwardly mobile families in search of a shelter from the spiralling property costs in London.

Could this have been the reason behind the relocation of Bob & Roberta Smith's 'Leytonstone Centre for Contemporary Arts' in the grounds of the Serpentine Gallery next to Rem Koolhaas' temporary pavilion in 2006?

6. We return therefore, to the 'Why?' question set at the outset, which stands squarely in the midst of permeable boundaries between different value systems and materialises itself at all levels, from macro to micro, from cultural policies to artists' intentionality.

We can discuss at lengths the variety of the products on display, compile successful case studies and instigate iterative evaluation processes, but we should also attend to the homogenous mechanisms of production that bring this variety into existence and most of all whether this apparent variety, hides instead some more unsavoury elements and important absences in the kind of work that is produced within the art/regeneration coupling, such as work for example which more or less openly conflicts with or comments on any of the aspects of the regenerations projects for which the artwork (whether object- or process-based) is supposed to function as a cultural marketing tool.

Beyond the current flurry of pseudo-scientific studies aimed at resolving a crisis in credibility of the assumed use, function and value of art within state, region or local cultural policies and their applications, -the ultimate stage in a resolute attempt of rendering the irrational subservient to rational motives - what interests me as an artist is the way in which artists operate - or withdraw their participation - within such conditions. In particular, two of the many current practices and positions towards art and

'THE FUNCTION OF PUBLIC ART IN REGENERATION IS TO SEX UP CONTROL OF THE UNDER-CLASSES'

[Text of the poster by FREEE, produced for the exhibition *Real Estate: Art in a changing City* curated by B&B at the ICA, London, 23 - 28 August 2005, and shown during the same period on a poster hoarding in Homerton, London]

regeneration have aroused my curiosity because of the odd tension between them, and the way they somehow, in their own slippery, humorous and ambivalent ways, they address extreme and conflicting possible articulations of the place – or indeed maybe the absence- of the artist in public art programmes and culture-led regeneration.

7.

'Art U Need: my part in the public art revolution', was a public art programme and a subsequent publication in the form of a diary by Bob & Roberta Smith who from March 2006 to April 2007 covered the role of lead artist of this project based in South Essex and produced by the visual arts development agency Commission East.

This was jointly funded by the East of England Development Agency's Investing in Communities Programme and the Arts Council England East, with the original objectives for the project set by Thames Gateway South Essex Partnership being 'rejuvenate five neglected spaces', 'involve local community in the process', 'produce work of long term merit and quality' (12).

The startling name of the project which prompted my interest was devised by the artist himself at the suggestion of the Agency, who 'wanted a title that reflects that they are interested in working with groups of people and not just plonking objects down in the landscape' (13), a position rendered even clearer by the following: *'Our project will not be just about locating a piece of sculpture in a windswept place for the local council to use as a logo for their stationery'*. (14)

The resolution of pushing ahead with the name 'Art U Need', albeit intended 'in an Orwellian sense where everything means the opposite of what it says' (15), is problematic in the sense that its inversion of meaning would really work only in the equally inverted situation where the community chosen would refuse to participate; but does it have a choice at all? Where the artist's dilemma is at least offered the possibility of disengagement or inversion/subversion play with the opportunity offered, can the community in question afford the same playful, subversive position in regard to the authorities who have proposed such engagement? Or in other words: How many Alices can there be in Wonderland at the same time?

We have already discussed earlier on, the *'Down with the plop, object-based work, up with the performative, process-based work'* slogan forcefully promoted here by the Smiths' as the latest re-enactment of a long and rather tired debate between public art camps which still persists, as if the ultimate resolution of the conflicts, deficiencies and inconsistencies of public art could simply be offered by a change in the modalities of the artistic activity itself, leaving untouched the structures and mechanisms that produced the conditions for any type of work to be commissioned.

The acquiescent radicalism and mild anarchism shouted through the 'revolutionary' claims for 'Art U Need' being an 'antidote to large scale iconic art', seem particularly void in the face of the overlapping of apparently contradicting tools employed within the same overarching strategy of public art and regeneration in Thames Gateway. Down the road from where Bob and Roberta Smith entertains his own pseudo-confrontational community-centred position, the Ebbsfleet Landmark Commission (16) is shaping up exactly its opposite: 'to create a physical artwork of great scale...to provide a high profile marker for Ebbsfleet Valley...at 40-50m high the artwork will be one of the biggest artwork in UK, comparable in scale to the Statue of Liberty'. The 'antidote' and the 'poison' are therefore administered by the same doctors, like some social placebo, each targeting a specific constituency and delivering a specific ailment.

Sculptural or architectural landmarks for the big business, socially-engaged art for the community; the ethos of 'choice' offered across the spectrum of approaches makes sure that mechanisms of clear identification between activities and their targets (or cultural products for cultural customers if you prefer) defines each one's respective camps without collisions.

Most of all, the boisterous claims for a 'public art revolution' can be understood here partly as a self-promotion vehicle for Bob & Roberta Smith, whose hand-painted signs are now a well-established brand, and partly as a perfect product for the cultural service industry of public art, for which his street-wise, 'megaphone-style', absurd and candid utterances are certainly doing a great job, despite a sense of anachronism underlying the main thrust of his revolutionary stance.

The 'revolution' of community-based public art suggested by 'Art U Need', has long ago imploded and has been already criticised way back in 1993 by Grant Kester's claim that 'community-based art serves the interests of neoconservatism by filling the gap left by the welfare state', and the intervening time in between then and now has done nothing else than reinforcing such claims, given the establishment of New Labour cultural policies.

To make his position clearer, a page of the book 'Art U Need' shows a crossed out drawing of the Angel of the North, incontrovertible evidence of the Gormley-bashing street-cred rather widespread across several sections of the artistic community, as a feeble testimony that the kind of 'revolution' to which BRS is willing to insert himself into is actually a transformation begun more than 20 years ago with the progressive revision, establishment and absorption of the 'New Genre public art' (17) into institutional practice, further expanded in the system of art through the proposition of Nicolas Bourriaud and its 'relational' quick recipe to re-launch the institution of the museum as a laboratory of post-production, and reinforced by the critique of community-based site-specific art proposed by Miwon Kwon in her 'One Place after another: site-specific art and locational identity'.

But leaving all the depth of such discourses to the unsaid and content with setting itself as an alternative to the sculptural object-based approach of public art, Bob and Roberta Smith's contribution to the debate seems nothing more than a shallow call for media attention for the public art programme of which he is a visible and alluring beacon.

Mr. Smith, a pseudonym which resonates with a misplaced desire for anonymity in the crowd, whilst pushing his identity as an artist, seems to recall the everyman of Frank Capra's 'Mr Smith goes to Washington', as the unlikely and naïve model citizen that refreshes through his candour, beliefs in 'Art and Democracy'.

Through the choice of the title 'Art U Need' and the employment of the term 'revolution', he openly canvass for a people's art, an art that provides and fulfil a need, but whose need? Whose call is its curatorial position responding to, beside those of the commissioning agency, in turn subcontracted by the cultural strategy of Thames Gateway regeneration project?

Whilst the credentials of BRS through previous projects such as the signage made for local businesses as part of the Shoreditch festival seems to sustain his interest in local and grassroots agents in his own neighbourhood, the transposition within the large scheme of regeneration projects – not just a matter of scale- suffers from the same troubles inherent in many adoptions of community-based art as one of the preferential public art vehicles for large scale top-down regeneration projects, in which the ultimate real winners of the dialogical process instigated by the presence of the artist in the

'community' are the artists themselves and the institutions who invested in their presence as a means to produce 'a lasting and measurable effect on the community and location.' (18)

8.

The second item is part a body of work by the art collective FREEE, aka Dave Beech, Andy Hewitt and Mel Jordan, part of which was produced before their 'merger' as a collective, by Andy and Mel working together as a collaborative practice. Whilst in the direct context of the Art in Regeneration debate one specific poster produced by the collective is particular relevant, other items in FREEE's activity in the last few years are equally important for this project, such as the 'Three Functions' series of posters, and the recently published 'The Freee Art Collective Manifesto for a Counter-Hegemonic Art', which particularly in the chapter 'Culture-led Regeneration' further expands the critical territory opened in the sentence of the poster above.

For FREEE, the function of public art in regeneration automatically becomes detected as suspicious, an impression conveyed by the peculiar use of the negatively inflexed term 'sexing up' which knowingly suggests a relation to the Gilligan/BBC affair and the proven manipulation by the highest rank of the UK government of the results of the security services reports on the seriousness of the military threat posed by Saddam Hussein.

The covering up of the truth or 'truth remixed' connected in the contemporary lexicon with the use of the term since the Iraq War scandal is clearly associating an equal 'remixing of the truth' in the way that arts in regeneration are addressing their relationship with the deprived communities it purports to 'regenerate', in the words of FREEE: 'Regeneration aims to change the 'mindset' and 'behaviour' (Landry, C., 'The Creative City: A Toolkit for Urban Innovators', London: Earthscan, 2000) of residents, to improve their effectiveness in creating capital and growth in order to reduce what is seen as a dependency on state provision.' (19)

One could even argue that often the emphasis of regeneration programmes is actually less placed on the relationship with the existing 'community' and instead privileges the clearing and setting up of new contiguous spaces aligned with the current modes of consumption; it is those new classes coming in who are the focus of the catering system of regeneration projects, rather than those already in place.

The poster you see here is a fourth annex in a series called 'Three Functions' which systematically and across different contexts opens up a dispute with public art as a whole, aimed at revealing its hidden ideology; they are for Dave Beech 'a trigger for debate', a form of counter-public art, they are slogans 'that speak to a counter-public. At the same time, of course, they speak to the dominant public in an 'off' manner.' (20)

Whilst the products of FREEE's critique are somehow bringing a refreshing outlook on the inherent instrumental character of art's embrace into the mechanism of regeneration, - particularly for those who suffer the claustrophobic and fragile milieu of such practices- their 'Functions' series intended as artworks, quickly evaporates into exercises in the orthodoxy of critique, anxious of reinstating as untouchable, the ontology of modern art and its central tenet of autonomous, emancipatory and demystifying praxis. The certainty of FREEE's unequivocal statements is both startling and endearing, an appearance suspended in between a communicative drive and its impossibility to communicate, enhanced by its public setting. The resulting message is clearly a fragment of a much longer tale, an extract of a missing narrative with the effect of giving to the poster a rather enigmatic quality, but also instigates a level of suspicion, possibly because of its use of the odd term 'sexing-up' and the timeliness of its

appearance, synchronous with so much other recent language-based and semantically playful artworks such as Mark Titchner's or Ryan Gander's work, just to mention two differing but related examples. (21)

Even before attempting to operate a kind of exegesis of the text of the poster itself, such method of address, - that of 'speaking to' - triggers an inverted reference to BRS' emphasis of 'working with groups of people', where the proximity of the artist with those directly involved in the process of development of the work is demanding paramount attention and ascribing value to its results. As BRS puts it: 'I am not a public artist, but I work with people' (22).

Whereas BRS's art is 'needed' but by the same token it 'needs those who need it' to stake its claims, FREEE's address is offered to its passing public as an incidental encounter, one that is not needed, but it may occur. In the first case, the contact with the public as participatory audience is necessary for the work to occur, -point scoring as people-counting-, in the second case such contact is only a corollary to a discursive, general connection which bypasses direct relationships of any kind. Despite the differences, in both projects the relationship with a 'public' is generalized to the point of being just an abstract entity: BRS trivializes his proximity to a specific community by saying 'You need art', whilst FREEE generalize its distance from it by not addressing the passing public but a discursive community already in possession of the elements necessary to put the isolated sentence in its wider context.

The apparent conflict between these approaches is also felt on a purely aesthetic level, where the studied anonymity and embrace of the mechanical reproducibility of the printed matter in FREEE's poster, whose only concession is to offer a colour backdrop for each function, distance itself from the hand-painted texts on reclaimed wood planks, in the amateurish, deliberately unskilled work trademark of BRS.

But equally, albeit in different ways, both approaches are explicitly referencing the same agit-prop techniques of May 1968, the street activist protest placards and the trade union banners; whilst BRS does so by reinstating the hand-drawn technique customary of sign-writing directly linking his own persona and bodily actions in the physical appearance of the work, FREEE's link with those posters appears as ideological, as 'insurgent provocations calling up for a counter-public', like contemporary updates on street protest placards, uniformly printed by the organisers, handed out in at the beginning of the march and then returned at the end.

Whilst BRS approach can afford, - and indeed makes a well visible virtue of- some candor and innocence, and does so in order to seek direct contact with individuals-as-public, FREEE's Function posters appear more withdrawn, reluctant to play much more than a peremptory insertion in a public sphere, assuming already the inexistence of an actual public for its message, - a stream of 'passers-by' unmoved and riddled by the poster - and addressing a discourse internal to public art and its constituencies.

Furthermore, the circulation of the 'Three function' series, which begun in Sheffield with the clarity of the 'Economic Function', then progressed in London in Trafalgar Square with the 'Social Function', ends at the jamboree of the Venice Biennale with the 'Aesthetic Function', and is then replicated and recontextualised as wall-based texts in galleries, small-scale limited edition of prints for purchase as a series, or shown as part of 'Situations Leeds' for Leeds City Art Gallery, resulting in a trajectory that ultimately embraces the system of art and fixes FREEE's position of critical engagement with public art by reinstating the preferred location of their critique of cultural hegemony as being internal to the system of art itself, since 'public art has no public'.(23)

In order to satisfy the imperative question at the heart of FREEE's investigation -'what public art does'- and bypass all others, its authors, acting like artist/citizens in the system of art must remain within its constituency as antagonistic characters, makers and critics, invalidating and re-shaping art at the same time, counter-hegemonic organisms in the same hegemonic ecosystem, waging an internal war.

Seen in this way, FREEE's poster on Art and Regeneration may appear as a ritual observation specific of art's own system, conducted by borrowing the aesthetic and the posturing of a radical contestation; an impression further advanced by the impressive as well as burlesque act of using the Communist Manifesto template - part spoof, part homage - to create their own Manifesto for a Counter-Hegemonic Art.(24)

Without a doubt, the metaphysical or phenomenological conceptions of public art invariably turn out to be culturally short sighted and exclusionary. But the cold-shower relativising approach of FREEE runs the risk of reducing questions of value in art to questions of social group convention and behaviour, which however valid can only partly describe its object. Such useful but strict monikers of class-conscience invalidate for instance a priori the proactive role that the under-class may have in the making and unmaking of its own condition, if not the subversive use that some public art can be subjected to by those it is expected to control. In other words, the ideology of domination central to their work is too crudely laid out, resulting in a heavy-handed and one-dimensional output of critique of public art.

Most of all, and in the context of this paper, what remains debatable is whether such acts of demystification, sound bites from academically well-trodden critiques of the public sphere turned into artworks, aid in any way to resolve the current impasse, or effectively puncturing the helium-filled balloons holding public art off the ground of the social systems they are purporting to regenerate.

Much more suggestive would be the proposition of occupying the empty space of the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square, as Dave Beech himself describe in 'Sloganeering', particularly resonating with the fact that Bob & Roberta Smith, probably as a result of his own slogan 'Art U Need', is now included in the current shortlist, together with Antony Gormley, for the Fourth Plinth commission. (25)

But the gulf between the two positions that my reading brings up can also be reversed because of the ambivalence of BRS position and his role as an agent for the 'sexing up of the under-classes' as well as calling for a 'public art revolution'; could we instead see BRS as a possible incarnation of the philistine heralded by FREEE as the counter-hegemonic cultural crusader in their manifesto?

With 'uncertainty, provisionality, open-endedness and deferral as the preferred orthodoxies of contemporary culture' (26), - a culture that giving credit to many of FREEE's observation is indeed showing itself open to charges of hegemony by impersonating the perennial 'dead man walking' suspending its own sentence whilst going on with business-as-usual- we will never really know.

All we can afford to say is that the firm belief in art as an unmistakably positive force -enough to substitute love as an opposite to war (27) - proclaimed by BRS, appears at distance as another subscription to the belief that 'Art is good for people' even if associated with regeneration, and public art is always worth doing despite all other functions ascribed to its doings by FREEE; but then again an artist would say that

wouldn't he/she?

Conclusion.

The kind of licentious crossings between unrelated practices used in this paper, and the posing of the question 'Why public art?' has attempted to gage the shape and character of some impasse faced by practitioners in public art. Whilst acknowledging that many of these are inherited and evolving rather than necessarily unique to contemporary public art, it is the current cultural climate in which they exist that render them important to us now, particularly given the amnesiac and sealed conditions into which most activity of public art seem to take place.

Caught in between an impossible choice of forfeiting either its localised social reality, or the artistic impulse to reprocess it in some way or another, public art will always have to reconstruct itself and its methodologies at every turn, which is actually the opposite of what an institutionalised practice can or is willing to do, particularly if replete with the 'smorgasbord' temptation of an all-pervasive curatorial practice, where all is available for re-processing and the set-up of endless configurations of 'discourse'.

Out of the publication 'Art U Need', one passage describing a 'dark vision' seems the most important to salvage, as it describes the dilemma prior to its resolution: '*He is offered a sum of money to make a public artwork. Great. A really decent sum of money realises his vision but with it comes a series of criteria that he would rather not confront. Every detail must have a reason and nothing is left to poetic serendipity. Now he finds himself wondering what he can put in between two huge banks of housing estate on the windswept shores of the river in the newly termed area of the Thames Gateway.*' (28)

And finally, my interest in confronting the practices discussed here, is also to stimulate and challenge my own, which is recalcitrant in assuming that art is unequivocally and always 'good', whilst still entertaining the utopian but necessary idea that across and in the folds of the entrapments of instrumentality, the nightmare of the market as a permanent and indissoluble condition, the false horizon of the dissolution of art into life, and the anthropologically driven promise of the totality of life as art's ultimate subject, some relevant co-habitation between artistic practice and the world we inhabit as citizens is an horizon worthwhile to pursue.

Ask yourself: 'Do we need public art here?'

Alberto Duman © 2008

Footnotes

1 Available for download at: <http://www.freee.org.uk/>

2 extract from an e-mail conversation with Ian Hunter, Littoral.

3 http://www.niallflaherty.com/textz/Art_as_an_Economic_Avant-Garde.rtf

4 Wallinger, Mark, (guest editor), 'Art for All: their policies and our culture', PEER, London, 2000

5 p.12 'Art for All...'

6 p.13, Stallabrass, Julian, 'Art Incorporated, The story of contemporary art, Oxford University Press, 2004

7 p.10, Art Incorporated.

8 Holden, John, 'Capturing Cultural Value: How culture has become a tool of government policy', DEMOS, 2004

9 See the project 'Artist as Space Explorer' on Arts Catalyst website: <http://www.artscatalyst.org/projects/space/ISS.html>

10 a strategy still happily going strong when a statement of power coated with all social symbolic layers has to be made; see Antony Gormley's piece for Dublin to have a confirmation of an unstoppable trend for 'landmarks' and the 'battle for the highest': <http://www.antonygormley.com/viewnews.php?newsid=86&page=1>

11 p.7 Smith, Bob and Roberta, 'Art U Need: my part in the public art revolution', Black Dog Publishing, London, 2007

12 Wright, David, introduction of Bob and Roberta, 'Art U Need: my part in the public art revolution', Black Dog Publishing, London, 2007

13 p.27, Art U Need.

14 P.18, Art U Need.

15 P.27, Art U Need.

16 <http://www.ebbsfleetlandmark.com/>

17 Lacy, Suzanne (ed.), 'Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art', Bay Press, 1995

18 from the call for artists of Art U Need public art programme

19 <http://www.freee.org.uk/>

20 Sloganeering; available for download at: <http://www.freee.org.uk/>

21 Also see another piece by FREEE: 'Protest is Beautiful', <http://www.freee.org.uk/>

22 p.6 'Art U Need'

23 Sloganeering; available for download at: <http://www.freee.org.uk/>

24 a particularly funny and valuable foray into the spirit of manifesto writing is Lee Scrivener's 'How to write an avant-garde manifesto', available to download as part of the resources (bottom of the page) in: http://wiki.bbkc.ac.uk/Buildingcultures/index.php/Manifesto_of_Possibilities

25 <http://www.fourthplinth.co.uk/>

26 Charlesworth, JJ, 'Curating Doubt', p.98, Rugg, Judith and Sedgwick, Michèle (ed.), 'Issues in Curating contemporary Art and Performance', Intellect, Bristol/Chicago, 2007

27 see Bob & Roberta Smith's shortlisted proposal for the Fourth Plinth commission at: <http://www.london.gov.uk/fourthplinth/plinth/smith.jsp>

28 p.18, Art U Need.

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2.Groys, Boris, 'Art as an economic avant-garde', download from www.niallflaherty.com/textz/Art_as_an_Economic_Avant-Garde.rtf

3. Wallinger, Mark, (guest editor), 'Art for All: their policies and our culture', PEER, London, 2000

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