

Sloganeering.

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One night after a few drinks about ten years ago, the art critic Robert Garnett, thinking aloud, said, “public art is the only art that doesn’t have a public”. Strictly speaking he is absolutely right: public art has no public, only passers-by. In this respect, public art is no different from posters and shop windows, and very different from football pitches, town halls, churches and universities. Public art is consequently riddled with contingency.

Public art is vexed. Three strands to public art’s strained predicament stand out: one, the complexities, contradictions and rivalries within the public; two, contestation over what art is; and three, the exacerbation of the first two predicaments that arises when you put them together in ‘public art’. Some theories of art (aesthetic ones, or theories of art’s elitism) would suggest that ‘public art’ is an oxymoron, while other theories of art (social and political understandings of art) would see the combination as a redundancy. We could begin by asking all sorts of questions about the terms, the abstract concepts, which are deployed in the idea of ‘public art’. We will have to address these at some stage. We can begin, however, in another way. Public art exists. What does it do?

Commemorative monumental sculpture dominates the pre-modern history of public art. Avantgardists like Tatlin introduced abstraction and other modernist techniques and debates into the resources of public art, and contemporary artists have not only included new materials and technologies into public art but explored new relations between public art and the public. The artist-architect group ‘Public Works’, for instance, consult and collaborate with the public from start to finish in their projects, treating the public

as co-producers and treating themselves as facilitators. If such contemporary artists working in the public sphere are implicitly questioning what public art can be (often distancing themselves from the tradition and label of ‘public art’ in the process), these slogans make that questioning explicit.

What these sloganeering public artworks do, ultimately, is bring a Habermasian concept of the public (as an arena of collective intercourse) into the very fabric of the work of public art. Art can be controversial, even deliberately so, but these slogans are not controversial in that sense: inflammatory, for sure, but they are not shocking or sensational – they are triggers for debate. And that is what is Habermasian about them. Their entire dispute with public art – with publicness as well as publicity, too – is couched in terms of open linguistic exchange. There may be wordless, performative ways of establishing, maintaining and transforming the public, but exchanging arguments has the virtue of doing so without suppressing internal conflict. Slogans contest culture like citizens standing up to be counted. A sloganeering art, therefore, joins in with the formation and reformation of culture by resisting the aesthetic ideology that art represents harmony and consensus. Entering the public

sphere does not mean submitting to it. These slogans take sides. And this is why they are a counter-public art.

Echoing the slogans all over the walls of Paris in 1968, these texts are insurgent provocations calling up a counter-public. After all, every counter-culture needs its counter-public. These are slogans, then, that speak to a counter-public. At the same time, of course, they speak to the dominant public in an ‘off’ manner. You can think of this as unwelcome and bumptious, if you like. Or you can think of it as an act of generosity: to address the cultural conservative with politicising slogans that undo her cherished beliefs about public art allows the conservative to transform herself. Taking sides doesn’t mean shutting the door on the dissidents that the side-taking might convert. Hostility does not close things down; it extends the field of possibilities beyond the horizon of dominant ideology. As public works of art, consequently, the three slogans occupy the spaces and histories of public art in the way that dissidents occupy official buildings during a coup, making themselves at home there. And as with the dissidents, whether you think that they are impostors or the equals of their ‘legitimated’ rivals, the occupation has the effect of politicising public space itself.

“The economic function of public art is to increase the value of private property.” This slogan shifts the debate on public art by reinserting it fully into the social. Public art’s economy is not restricted to who payrolls it. Actually, this slogan is far-reaching. Capitalism is a pervasive, colonising, totalising system of exchange, which contaminates everything in its path. As such, the economic function of public art is a monster with a thousand limbs. Almost every effect of public art can be said to have an economic upshot. Public order has a measurable economic advantage, as does ‘community spirit’, education and regeneration. The economic functions of public art are legion. However, since capitalism is above all the organisation of society according to private property (contrast Feudalism, which organises society by the granting of land, titles, offices and rent in return for political and military services), it is private property that is at the root of all economic functions within capitalism. Public art is no exception. The public sector is meant to by-pass or minimise the divisive impact of the private sector – the NHS is based on patient need not the ability to pay, for instance – but in the case of public art (which is not necessarily paid for with public funds) private property is enhanced. Public art boosts private property.

Public art has other functions too. “The social function of public art is to subject us to civic behaviour.” Commemorative monumental sculptures do this by representing the agents of the state (Monarchs, Generals, politicians, war heroes, captains of industry, philanthropists, etc) as worthy of public attention, as the legitimate occupants of raised platforms in town squares, public parks and the like. This is hegemony in action. Lenin praised the bourgeoisie for working this out and ordered all the public statues to be torn down and replaced with monumental sculptures of the heroes of the revolution. This was counter-hegemony in action. In those early years of the Russian revolution, the social function of public art was to represent the working class as the hegemonic class, to

foster historic behaviour. The social function of public art under capitalism, however, is to present the bourgeoisie as the universal class (not only with sculptures of its guardians and champions, but also with representations of its liberalism, modernity and technology). It asks us to be like them. In doing so, public art subjects us to the bourgeoisie’s reined-in version of public collective activity. And if you look at the Bloomsbury group, you can see that the bourgeoisie could feel reined-in by it, too. Public spaces have to be disciplinary spaces if civic behaviour is to prevail there. There are laws but there are other techniques. In response to the Toxteth riots in 1981, Thatcher’s government invested in a garden festival: in place of poverty and unrest, the decorative suburban retreat of the happy family. A civic code of behaviour is inscribed into public space as a deliberate act of social control. Public art is a technique of preventing riots, too, by addressing its passers-by as good citizens. And ‘good’ here means acquiescent and risk-free rather than flourishing, assertive, together, organised and demanding.

At the time of writing, the formulation for the slogan on the aesthetic function of public art has not been finalised. One of the peculiarities of the aesthetic is its ideology of functionlessness, so the aesthetic function of public art must contradict the aesthetic ideology of public art. What is the function of functionlessness? We know what the economic function of functionlessness is: by outstripping utility, the art object is not cast as worthless but priceless. And the social function of functionlessness is the hegemonic trick of representing partisan interests (bourgeois civics) as universal ones (good citizenship) – functionlessness, here, involves the social repression of a very specific function. But what is the aesthetic function of functionlessness? Taste might be a suggestive conceptual model for getting to grips with this. In particular I’m thinking about the two faces of taste, one being the purely contingent, individual aspect of taste, the other its normative, hierarchised version: the

contrast between ‘it’s all a matter of taste’ and ‘no one ever went broke underestimating the taste of the American public’ – the difference, perhaps, between something that tastes good and someone having good taste. What is crucial here is the way that the concept of ‘good taste’ fulfils its social functions by masquerading as asocial. Taste conceals its modes of acquisition so that its social divisiveness appears as natural distinctions between those who have it and those who don’t. We might want to think of this as the social function of aesthetics but, in fact, this is the condition of possibility of aesthetics itself: the prerequisite for aesthetics to be charismatically distinct from other forms of knowledge. The slogan for the aesthetic function of public art will either articulate this deception or contain it as a kernel of critique. At present nobody knows what that slogan will be. Insofar as these slogans aim to generate open debate, that not-knowing seems wholly appropriate.

As slogans, these works can be displayed in various formats, techniques and venues. I like to think of them popping up all over the place, first perhaps on the street, then in an art magazine or stuck to someone’s fridge door. This is one of the consequences of making reproducible works. They do not need to be restricted to mechanically reproducible forms such as postcards, posters and billboards, although there are good reasons for starting there. After all, they are texts. You could write them on the back of your hand if you want. Or the Royal Mint could include them on the new design for the fifty-pound note. In fact, there is no venue too lowly for these slogans, and no venue too noble. By piercing public art’s bubble, the slogans short-circuit the hierarchy that exists between the trivial and the monumental. There’s no reason, therefore, why the slogans couldn’t occupy the top of the empty plinth in Trafalgar Square. If generations of dissenters are the best tradition we have, then no public work of art is more appropriate for that site than slogans undermining the ideology of official public art.