



Late at Tate visitors

BEYOND PUBLIC ART

Mark Wilsher proposes redefining public art

IN HIS RECENT ARTICLE IN THESE PAGES (AM329) Dave Beech used the new 7/7 memorial in Hyde Park to highlight not just the way that outdoor monumental sculpture is increasingly becoming the professional domain of architects and planners but also the inadequacy of defining 'public art' as art that is simply located in a public place. A contemporary understanding of publicness must surely take its lead from writers like Henri Lefebvre and Jürgen Habermas who effectively demolished the idea of the physical agora as public space over 40 years ago. 'The public sphere is not public because of its spaces,' Beech writes, 'but because of its activities' and this is surely correct. However, I would like to push the argument further, beyond the call to see more radical activities in the public sphere that might reflect current critical practice, to expand

the notion of public art until it spills over into gallery or studio-based practice, and there is a wider idea of a kind of art that takes publicness as its subject without necessarily needing to expose itself to the weather.

If we follow Habermas and accept that the public sphere is defined as a discursive activity (which is at the root of the past decade's enthusiasm for socially engaged, relational or dialogical art) rather than a set of spaces, then we should look to see where that discussion about art takes place. Certainly since the millennium here in the UK there has been a massive increase in audiences and participation at the new generation of large public art galleries, of which Tate Modern is the prime example. The public funding of contemporary art, boosted for better or worse by New Labour's embrace of the instrumentalised creative economy, has seen venues filled with crowd pleasing live events, late night openings and screenings, as well as the more usual talks and panel debates that aim to generate public discussion. The programmers at these institutions have learned to be clever at funnelling money from educational pots into all sorts of activities that expand the discursive space around their buildings. This has all been assisted by the general turn towards spectacularisation and an 'event culture' that promises novel experiences to the consumers of art rather than fusty old paintings. Are these late night events really arenas in which ideas are discussed among a public? Perhaps. The crowds that massed and watched themselves in the mirrored ceiling of Olafur Eliasson's *Weather Project*, 2003-04, surely constituted some sort of a contemporary public

sphere. But Habermas also described the way in which a commercial culture co-opts discussion for its own ends, staging debates that give the impression of enabling discussion while clandestinely using them to shore up established reputations and preserve the status quo. A lot of second- and third-rate relational art could be classed under this heading: tables, chairs and refreshments provided, and the audience told to make use of the space for discussion. But at how many of these events has something worthwhile really emerged? They are often purely rhetorical spectacles where we the audience are asked to affirm that we have been offered the possibility of participation. No thanks.

Away from the thronging public in these pseudo-agoras, then, where else does public discussion of contemporary art take place? The obvious answer is the traditional one: in the pages of daily newspapers and magazines. It could be argued that when any art enters the mainstream mass media it becomes public to an extent. The slightest conceptual gesture, dreamed up in the studio and quietly exhibited in a gallery, can become public property if the press decides it is a story worth following. This is public art that perhaps was never intended to be, but became public nonetheless (think of Martin Creed's light going on and off). When contemporary art features in the mainstream press, however, nine times out of ten the story is meant to mock the artist who is cast as an archetypal outsider engaging in some ridiculous or useless activity, and the art audience is cast as a bunch of pretentious dupes. Or else it is a question of public money: how much exactly is being wasted and

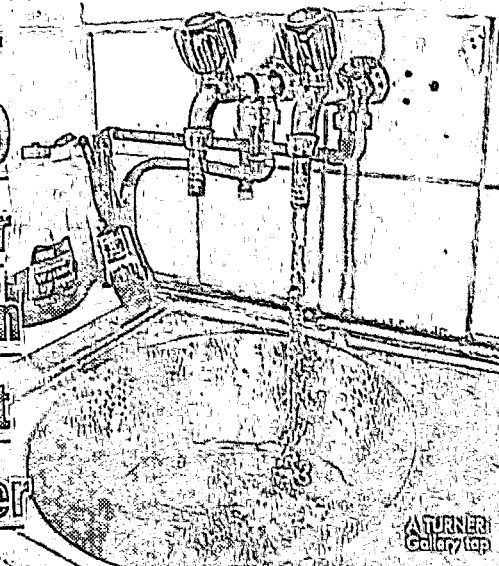
media coverage of Mark McGowan's *Running Tap* in 2005


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WASTER

Artist to pour
15,000,000
litres of water
down the drain
.. to highlight
waste of water





STUNT: McGowan's nut-pushing

By ROBERT STANSFIELD

AN artist seeking to spotlight waste of water is leaving a cold tap on at full power for a year.

That will waste 15 million litres, at a time when Britain is facing its worst drought since 1976.

But Mark McGowan, 37, who calls himself an artist for the common man, is unrepentant over his "creation", titled *The Running Tap*.

McGowan, threatened with prosecution over his bizarre protest, said: "This will save water by highlighting the waste in homes when people brush their teeth, wash vegetables or shave with the tap running."

His tap is in a kitchen sink at the House Gallery in Camberwell, South London. It began running on Tuesday at two litres every 10 seconds, and the final bill could be £15,000.

Thames Water said it could issue an order to McGowan to stop waste. A breach would result in prosecution.

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HIS OTHER WORKS OF ART

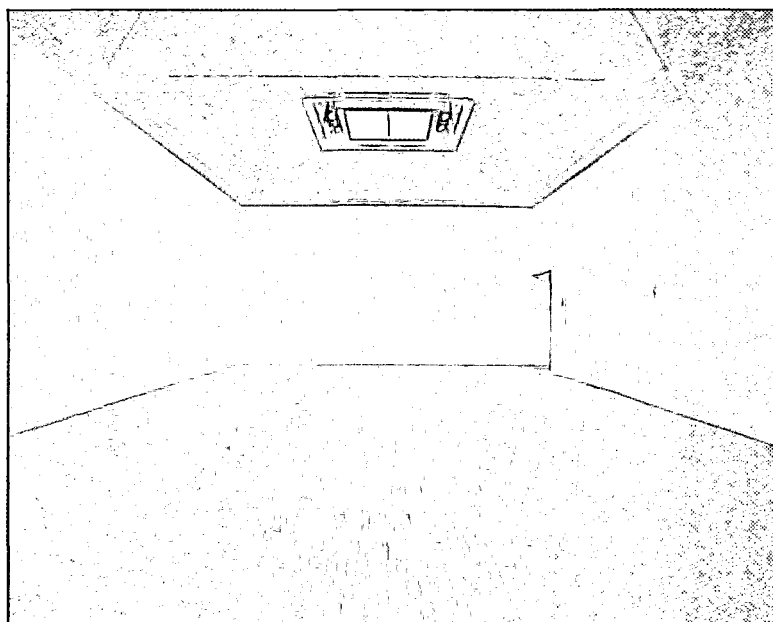
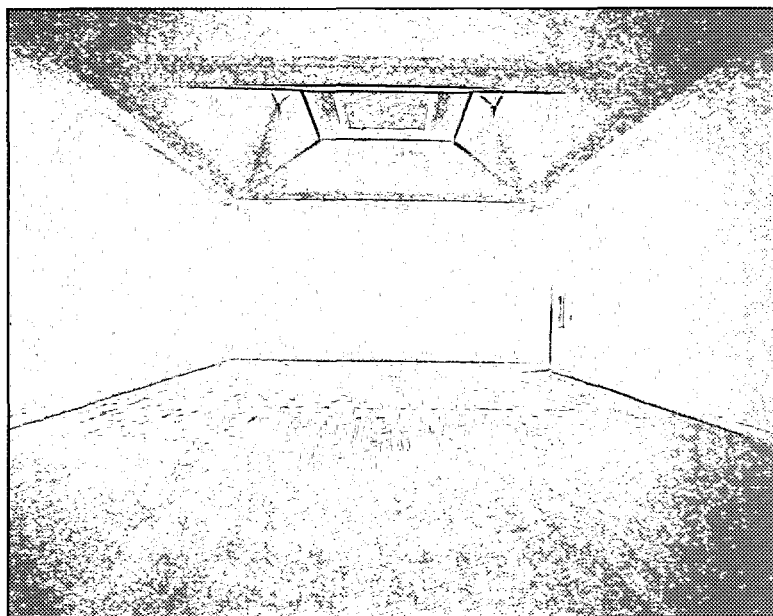
COLLEGE lecturer McGowan is no stranger to stunts. He pushed a monkey nut along the road with his nose for seven miles to Downing Street in a protest over student fees.

He walked backwards for 11 miles with a 27lb turkey on his head, shouting at fat people. And he ate a fox to focus on the plight of crack-heads.

how many hospital beds could have been paid for by an equivalent sum? Art is routinely misdescribed and misunderstood in the news pages, with serious coverage relegated to a weekly review page commissioned from a specialist critic. Real discussion is safely circumscribed. It often seems that the general public is just not prepared to take art seriously. The sculptor William Turnbull once wrote: 'the problem with public sculpture is not the sculpture, it's the public.' It is unlikely that Charles Saatchi's televised art talent contest will do much to foster engaged debate over yet more ephemeral trivia.

But it is possible to make work that operates within the discursive framework of the mass media, that is visible to a huge public and yet holds on to its radical potential. *The Running Tap*, 2005, by Mark McGowan was a simple project that left a domestic cold water tap running in a gallery kitchen for one year 'as a comment on how much water we all waste'. Coming after a long hot spell and droughts in some parts of the country, this was picked up by the media and caused a considerable furore. The *Guardian* ran a two-page spread on the artist and the story circulated right across the world in the form of syndicated reports. Journalists were solemnly led into the back room and shown the running tap. The BBC reported that Thames Water was considering legal action to get it turned off. By coming up with a strong, easily communicable image, McGowan lures the media into not just disseminating but actually performing his work for him (other pieces include *Artist Eats Fox*, 2004, and *Kick a Crackhead*, 2005). Whereas most performance artists produce their own documentation, he just tapes a three-minute segment of ITN news or buys the *Daily Mail*. At one point McGowan was even artist in residence on Richard & Judy's daily programme. Isn't that the very epitome of public art? First generation conceptual artists like Dan Graham may have inserted their work into national publications through the act of buying advertising space, but McGowan actually taps directly into the media itself to generate public discussion (as did Rod Dickinson with his crop circle works).

As I suggested above, socially engaged or dialogical practices have really emerged over the past decade as a more sophisticated model of public art than the old 'turd in the plaza' and are now taught on undergraduate courses and viewed as a viable career option. In the course of this wider popularisation it has become orthodox to base such activities on the notion of dialogue derived from Habermas's 'Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere', where power hierarchies are bracketed and every subject is able to play an equal part in the creation of a space for democratic conversation. Of course the real world is not so ideal, and taking their lead from a variety of philosophical and sociological critiques of Habermas we have seen critics, including Claire Bishop and Beech, highlight the role of counter public spheres and 'agonism', to use Chantal Mouffe's term that suggests a kind of lesser antagonism. It is this sense of antagonism that makes the



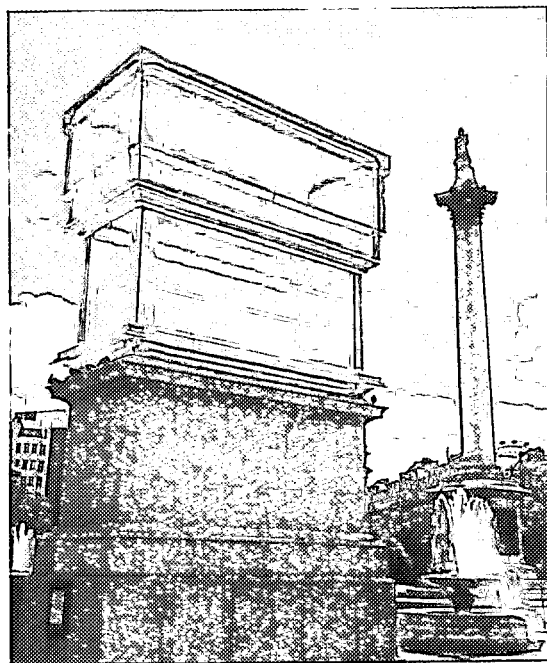
example of Gordon Matta-Clark's *Window Blowout*, 1976, seem relevant today. But the concept of dialogue still stands as a structuring paradigm for many works that seek to engage with the public realm, even on agonistic terms. To me this model seems undefined and over-generalised. It is undoubtedly more suited to an optimistic view of the public sphere as an accessible discursive realm rather than one riven with inequality and conflict.

When it comes to describing the interactions between parties who fundamentally disagree, who are attempting to press their own concerns rather than create consensus, it may be that elements of the theory of negotiation are more appropriate than dialogue. Negotiation theories model differential power relationships within complex situations where there can be many problems and issues in need of resolution. Emerging largely from North American sociology, and with an

Martin Creed
Work No. 227: *The lights going on and off* 2000
5 seconds on, 5 seconds off
installation view at
Tate Britain in 2001

>> I would like to expand the notion of public art until it spills over into gallery or studio-based practice, and there is a wider idea of a kind of art that takes publicness as its subject without necessarily needing to expose itself to the weather.

emphasis on diplomatic and industrial issues, they are admittedly instrumental and can be rather reductive. But that element of concreteness acts as a corrective to the woolly manner in which dialogue is usually invoked to underpin social art projects. To take Thomas Crow's example of 'strong' site-specific art that Beech refers to, it is clear that convivial relationality does not describe the work adequately. Crow simply observes that its duration must be limited 'because its presence is in terminal contradiction to the nature of the space it occupies'. Beech might position this as a clash or overlap of competing public spheres, although he did not say this explicitly in his last article. Seeing temporary projects like Michael Asher's relocation of the George Washington statue from the perspective of negotiation theory, however, provides a more nuanced explanation. When two parties cannot reach agreement on the main point of their deliberations, they might still be able to agree on 'softer' or lesser points relating to the scenario as a whole. On process rather than substance, say, or principle rather than detail. One common solution to apparently intractable issues is to set a temporary time limit on what is agreed: 'OK, I'll allow you an extra tea break for one month and we'll see how productivity is affected,' for instance.



Rachel Whiteread
Monument 2001

In discussing public art, the two positions can be described as critical contemporary artist versus conservative guardians of the public realm. It is really no wonder that so much of what is permitted to be permanent is so unchallenging when the administrators and bureaucrats of local councils inevitably lag far behind what is printed in specialist publications like this one. A temporary work, however, is far more easily agreed upon. The possibility of achieving weaker-strength agreements about what is permissible in the public realm, in terms of time-limited projects, is what lies behind the rise in transient public art. Trafalgar Square's Fourth Plinth is a prime example, where even hugely expensive new commissions like Bill Woodrow's bronze tree and Rachel Whiteread's inverted resin plinth were only intended to remain in position for a span of months. Antony Gormley's recent attempt only makes this inherent defeatism more highly visible. The large institutions where a kind of public sphere is acted out would never allow experimental, genuinely untested art into their galleries on a permanent basis, but they are happy to permit it for an evening or over the weekend when it supports the culture of art as populist leisure activity.

Of course developments in art have been driven by many factors, and the rise of the temporary reflects a whole range of interests from commodity critique to the famously fleeting shapes of modernity itself. But it is noteworthy that, while challenging art within the gallery has for the most part held on to its permanent material status (aided by teams of conservators now struggling to save or replace decaying objects from as little as 20 years ago), art in the public realm really has developed into a whole 'new genre' defined to a large extent by transience and temporal-specificity. This surely reflects the pragmatism of artists' desires to locate work in the public sphere as much as the fragmentary and disputed nature of publicness itself.

I like Beech's phrase 'old genre public art' a lot because it collapses a whole multitude of what were once diverse and urgent practices into a single weather-resistant lump. We look back at the traditional public art of the 1950s, 60s and 70s now and perceive a striking homogeneity of forms and materials. This is the genre that is aped with much success by 'professional' public artists everywhere, who turn out vaguely organic forms carved in stone or interesting looking metal whatnots with little regard for the historical ideas that originally motivated these styles. It is unchallenging because it needs to be in order to be granted permanence by the guardians of traditional culture. Leave monumental bronzes to the self-appointed professionals, I suggest, and look elsewhere for today's genuinely public art. ▢

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