



OUT OF TIME OUT OF PLACE **PUBLIC ART (NOW)**

Edited by Claire Doherty

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with texts by Claire Doherty, Per Gunnar Eeg-Tverbakk,
Chris Fite-Wassilak, Matteo Lucchetti, Magdalena Malm,
Alexis Zimberg

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PLACE



For my father, Neil Doherty, my compass
– CD

On the cover: Heather and Ivan Morison, *Journée des Barricades*, Wellington, New Zealand (2008); Alex Hartley, *Nowhereisland*, Weymouth, UK (2012); Paweł Althamer, *Common Task*, Bródno, Poland (2008–12)

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Foreword

In 2010, curator Stella d’Ailly, with the support of a European Commission grant, brought us together as a group of public art producers so that we could explore common practices and exchange information about the distinct challenges we faced in our individual contexts. The purpose was to enable us to articulate the vitality and importance of what we understood to be contemporary public art on a Europe-wide level. What quickly emerged was a shared language that distinguished our collective curatorial approach to working in the public realm from that of gallery-based curating, public art consultancies and the management of outdoor art events.

We found that each of us had an affinity with the artistic strategies of unsettling notions of place, rather than those of place-making, and a belief in the important role that art can play in social justice. We also learned that each of us was an advocate for a fundamental shift in thinking about the ‘time’, as well as the ‘space’, of public art. And we discovered that the contradictory push-and-pull between collaboration, co-production and participation on the one hand and artistic autonomy and criticality on the other governed the ways in which we located a place for an artist’s work to operate in the public realm.

As our network has expanded over the past four years, this publication has grown out of our discussions as an attempt to survey, interrogate and compare different approaches to public art. While recognizing the specific histories and network of affiliations that each project represents, the book proposes some forty artworks as indicators of the expansive ecology of artists, organizations, producers and curators who are working in the public realm today. Our hope is that this survey will act as a source of inspiration and a catalyst for debate that will contribute to the increasingly urgent efforts to redefine conventional ideas of where, how and when public art takes place.

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Introduction



Alfredo Jaar, *The Skoghall Konsthall* (2000)



At the turn of the millennium, the small town of Skoghall in Sweden witnessed an extraordinary event. One day in September 2000, the town's mayor cut the ribbon to the entrance of the town's first newly built museum, a remarkable paper structure. The town's population flocked in. In the evening, the building was emptied, the fire department entered and torched the interior columns, and the structure was burnt to the ground. The flames ripped through the paper walls with a speed that took the watching crowd by surprise, and by nightfall the charred skeleton had collapsed.

This was an artwork by the Chilean-born artist Alfredo Jaar, who had been invited by the town to propose a

work of public art (at the suggestion of Skoghall-born artist Jørgen Svensson). Jaar was shocked on visiting the town by the absence of any space for culture. The massive local pulp mill was owned and operated by the multinational paper manufacturer Stora Enso, and provided the primary source of employment to the population. Typically for Jaar, the artist resisted the council's expectations by refusing their funding, setting out that his project should be funded entirely by Stora Enso, opened by the mayor and razed to the ground after just twenty-four hours. Despite local resistance to the proposal (particularly around the wastage of materials), Jaar succeeded in persuading the company and the town's authorities to build and burn the museum. 'I wanted to offer a glimpse of what contemporary art is and what it can do in a community. Then by "disappearing" it in such a spectacular way, I hoped to reveal its absence', Jaar stated.¹

Though produced some five years before the time frame of this publication, the life and death of *The Skoghall Konsthall* acts as an appropriate precursor to the forty projects gathered here. It raises, in its simple, though striking story, the issues at stake for public art in the 'now' of the past decade. The local authority extended its invitation to Jaar because he was internationally renowned for his work – and the invitation was bound to the hope that the artist would address a need within the town itself: that the public artwork might move the town from the periphery to the centre of Swedish national consciousness; that it might address the absence of cultural provision; that it might (in the commissioner's eyes at least) act as a symbol of the town's progressive, contemporary credentials to rival those of Gothenburg or Stockholm.

Jaar's response was one of resistance but, importantly, an act of resistance complicit with the commissioners. Urged by the town to gently dismantle the structure and save the materials, Jaar resisted precisely because he understood the provocative act of burning would resonate in the town's consciousness far deeper and longer, and because he understood how the dramatic image of burning could act as a cipher of public art as event beyond Skoghall through the media and the field of art. It is a public artwork that came into being in recognition of the artist's potential to contribute to place-making; it proposes public art as a gathering point and catalyst for change; it unsettles the lifespan of public art by demonstrating

that the fleeting moment might be more valuable than the permanent, static public sculpture; it gathers a temporary community of interest around it, rather than targeting a specific group; it intervenes within the economic systems that sustain the social order of a place; and it uses the media as a distribution mechanism for a remote audience so that it exists as a story in the collective memory away from its physical locale and time. It is public art – now.

The focus of this book is the decade since the publication of *Contemporary Art: From Studio to Situation*, a critical investigation into the production and curation of contemporary art in response to specific contexts.² It is disappointing to find that ten years after that volume, public art remains cast in the collective imagination as either the uninvited guest or the mass entertainer. The successful public artwork continues to be judged against its ability both to galvanize popular opinion and to contribute positively to place-making on the basis of immediate impact. Invariably, if it fails on either count, it is judged against its price tag. For those who support the funding, commissioning and production of public artworks, value largely still resides in its capacity to endure physically, or in its return on the funder's investment. The design-and-build methodology of architecture continues to be applied as an ill-fitting, constricting suit to the artistic processes by which public artworks are commissioned. And artists and art critics alike still mistrust the genre. British journalist Jonathan Jones has decried public art as, 'a production line for boring art, and mavericks have no place in its dreary ethic'.³

Perhaps, we should consign public art to the roundabout where it belongs. Artist Manfred Pernice would have us do so. His *Roulette* project for Leidsche Rijn near Utrecht (2006–9) was a wry comment on the redundancy and invisibility of municipal public sculpture. Every six months, a set of different public sculptures owned by the city was brought together on a bland patch of grass on the temporary Koehoornplein roundabout. His modular display system, with its range of oblong, squat, fat and thin concrete plinths, removed the original context and purpose from each sculpture, exposing their pointless and somewhat anachronistic qualities as objects that clutter up our public spaces.

But whilst the cultural arms race has persisted worldwide (epitomized by Anish Kapoor and Cecil Balmond's *ArcelorMittal Orbit*, the UK's tallest sculpture,

commissioned for the London 2012 Olympic Park), a number of artistic strategies have emerged in the public realm that offer us alternative possibilities for the collective understanding of what public art can be, and an alternative vocabulary for identifying how, where and when it takes place.

Here we find artists effecting geological and physical displacements, conjuring mirages that enter the social imagination, setting in motion quiet infections that fundamentally remake place and space, and proffering utopian urban futures. Here we find the bootlegging of land art and environmental tactics from the 1960s and 1970s, from Robert Smithson's proposal to tow a floating island around Manhattan to Agnes Denes's *Wheatfield* in New York's Battery Park. Here we find the subversion of public art's misuse as a wayfinder, encouraging us to get lost, and the emergence of longer-term occupations of space, which allow collaborative ideas to develop over time, leaving room for the unplanned.

Clearly artists have always worked beyond the boundaries of the art institution or studio, but perhaps what has changed over the past decade is that approaches such as those described above are now actively sought out by commissioners and curators. Most notable changes include the commissioning of artists from the contemporary gallery sector employing media, materials and processes previously thought unsuitable for the public realm, the incorporation of dynamic curatorial methods, and the exchange of single-sited, permanent outcomes in favour of dispersed interventions or cumulative, curated programmes that evolve over space and time. As a result, we have also seen the emergence of a new type of public art curator and producer who wields logistical, creative and intellectual ingenuity, alongside a proliferation of artist collectives that operate through networks dispersed around the world thanks to advances in digital communication.

Public art can be understood as a variety of forms and approaches that engage with the sites and situations of the public realm. But this publication is not engaged in the task of definition. As Nato Thompson, chief curator of the New York-based commissioning organization Creative Time, states: 'Many artists aren't specifically invested in describing their work as art so much as they utilize the tools of artistic production to produce interesting moments and provocations. This isn't a strategy unique



Manfred Pernice, *Roulette* (2006, round 4 of 6)



Agnes Denes, *Wheatfield, A Confrontation: Battery Park Landfill, Downtown Manhattan* (1982)

to what is described as “art”. Trying to figure out what the thought-provoking moment in public space is should be the job of the critic. That’s where you’ll find the real meat of the project. Trying to pin down whether it’s art or not is a necessary journey but one that will probably lose sight of the truly interesting moments that drive the work.⁴

This book explores those moments as a means of analysing how artworks emerge, are commissioned or self-initiated, what charge they set off and what strategies or tactics they use to disturb the status quo, and ultimately what they leave behind. As Jaar’s *Skoghall Konsthall* indicated in 2000, artistic projects such as his are not compliant in place affirmation. They are agitations, dislocations and interventions, which remake our sense of place. Some of course may be overtly confrontational; others quietly shift the ground under our feet, but each one is dedicated to a process of seeing anew, of raising questions about the world in which we live. This also includes those that take place within the framework of reoccurring large-scale international exhibitions such as Documenta or the Venice Biennale. Such interventions astutely respond to the positioning of the artwork as a destination on the cultural tourist’s itinerary by disorientating the visitor and putting them in direct contact with the social conditions that are often disguised behind the gloss of the contemporary art carnival.

What clearly emerges from these forty projects is a requirement for a shift in our thinking about the ‘time’, rather than simply the ‘space’, of public art. In the wake of critical responses to the fast and loose itinerancy of biennial curating, we can see emerging long-term, durational programmes that develop over a period, often requiring the charismatic agency of the artist to sustain them.⁵

Debates about social engagement in the visual arts had, by the mid-2000s, appeared to polarize between antagonism and collaboration. Shannon Jackson’s *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (2011) provides one of the clearest definitions of the terms of the debate: ‘For those who measure a work’s success on its degree of community “self-definition”, its efficacy is measured in its outreach strategies, its means for providing access, the representational demographics of its participants, and its identifiable social outcomes. Such critical barometers also worry about the mediating role of the artist, about

whether an artistic vision enables or neutralizes community voices. But other critical frameworks question the concept of artist-as-community-helpmate on different terms; indeed, for some, a critical barometer starts by questioning the concept of community on which such work relies.’⁶

This book reveals that through strategies of occupation and perpetuation the potential of public art to expose and respond to the encroachment of corporate interests on public space, to the diminishing opportunities for social cohesion and freedom of speech, and to the invisibility of the displaced and dispossessed in public life is considerable. These artists create the capacity for creative illusion – that is, the ability to think and act as if things were different. Artists such as Theaster Gates, Futurefarmers and Fernando García-Dory operate between a state of embeddedness and critical distance – acting as both insider and outsider. These strategies are reflected in other long-term projects beyond the scope of this book, which have continued beyond the artist’s initial catalysing role. Søsja Jørgensen and Geir Tore Holm’s *Sørfinnset skole/ the nord land*, for example, is a process-led cooperative exploring art, ecology and long-term collaboration in the north of Norway, originally inspired by the Land Foundation, an ecological rice farm in the Chiang Mai area of Thailand by artists Kamin Lertchaiprasert and Rirkrit Tiravanija. Homebaked in the Anfield area of Liverpool is a cooperative bakery and community land trust, which grew out of *2Up 2Down*, initiated and supported by Liverpool Biennial and artist Jeanne van Heeswijk.⁷

Such radical departures from the conventional notion of a public artwork necessitate a rethinking of how we document, assess and judge their significance or success. In 2011, Professor Lynn Froggett and her team at the University of Central Lancashire, in the north of England, published the findings of a two-year-long study into the impact of socially engaged arts practice and the ways in which its value could be evaluated and articulated. Their research is particularly relevant here for observing how certain artworks maintain critical rigour while also being socially progressive.

‘Artistic outcome and aesthetic (whether conceived as aesthetic of process or of product)’, Froggett suggests, ‘is not subordinate to other social agendas. The artwork remains as an essential third object or point of dialogue



Top: Søsja Jørgensen and Geir Tore Holm, *Sørfinnset skole/ the nord land* (2003–ongoing), summer party 2012
Bottom: *Homebaked*, in the former Mitchell’s Bakery, Anfield, Liverpool, 2014

between the artist or arts organisation and members of the public who are not arts professionals.... To “work” as this third point of attention which activates new interpretations, it must retain aesthetic integrity – this enables it to endure as a third “object” that opens up ways of seeing things differently. Where it “collapses” as a third there may still be pleasurable experiential immediacy but it is unlikely to generate new relational forms or critical dialogue.’¹⁸

It is this aesthetic integrity to which new forms of public art aspire and which can distinguish critically successful public artworks from other cultural activities that offer immediate gratification, but which do not generate new forms of critical dialogue or transformation. It is here that we find our argument for the value of contemporary art in the public realm beyond mass spectacle, and here that we find the argument for investment in temporary interventions alongside longer-term durational projects.

On Friday 12 October 2007, Mobile Clubbing organized a flash-mob silent disco on Doris Salcedo’s *Shibboleth* in the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern. Observing the rules of Mobile Clubbing – 1. Arrive at location at given time. 2. Start dancing to your personal stereo to the music of your choice. 3. Use the whole space. Spread out. This will prevent us from being moved on. 4. Don’t worry clubbers you will be one of many. – the crowd of around a thousand arrived in the gallery unannounced and danced silently (albeit to music on their headphones) to the bemusement of onlookers. Because art in a public context is not always expected, or sought out, and infiltrates across multiple networks of journeys and imaginations, the impact of the digital revolution and particularly social media is transforming the ways in which we can conceive of this conversation as it occurs across public space. In his influential 2002 essay ‘Dispersion’, Seth Price argues, ‘We should recognize that collective experience is now based on simultaneous private experiences, distributed across the field of media culture, knit[ted] together by ongoing debate, publicity, promotion and discussion.... Publicness today has as much to do with sites of production and reproduction as it does with any supposed physical commons, so a popular album could be regarded as a more successful

instance of public art than a monument tucked away in an urban plaza.’¹⁹

Social media is certainly characterizing the new ways in which events are promoted and circulate, but mindful of Jacques Rancière’s warning that ‘participation doesn’t guarantee critical legitimacy’, artists are embracing social media as a means of activating criticality so that the audience can in effect ‘speak back’ as part of the work itself.

One wonders how the story of the burning of *The Skoghall Konsthall* might have been told had social media existed in 2000, and how, in turn, in 2114 the first reader of the hundred texts in Katie Paterson’s *Future Library* might view our intentions to make a public artwork for the future: how the anachronistic quality of the paper of a printed book might feel entirely out of place and out of time, a work kept entirely from public view for a hundred years that speaks the words of writers over the century.

Claire Doherty



Mobile clubbing event on Doris Salcedo’s *Shibboleth* at Tate Modern, 12 October 2007