



“People *Making Places: Imagination in the Public Realm*” Imagine!

Will Alsop

In our UK culture, Art is contained within the gallery, studio and academic institutions, where it is safe. In such confines it can be accessible to only the curious, the stupid, or the lost. The new generation of artist is not satisfied with this compartmentalisation of their product and are fighting back.

I visited the Venice Bienale in 2003 with some diligence. Over two days I covered every inch of all the exhibitions and slowly it became apparent that the majority of the show was mainly concerned with the who, what, why and wherefore of being there i.e. at the Venice Biennale. Yet, in the meantime, I have regular meetings in my studio with students from the Slade School of Art, who do not appear to be worried about their status, with regard to the outlet for their work, at all. They know that the gallery system, the museum system, and the collectors system are over. They place no reliance on these existing spheres of activity, and understand that their art practice will be within the world that they determine, not dependent on an accepted slot that the artist traditionally filled.

They are interested in the streets and what happens there. They are demanding an interaction with the actual world that can give a power and a relevance to their creative perceptions and works and they wish to respond to an ever-growing demand from THE PERSON IN THE STREET.

This change in the younger artist coincides with an emerging interest in “the public realm”. This rather politically correct term refers to public space, which of course, from the artists’ point of view, is the alternative to the gallery. But of course, in order to ‘play’ in the street you have to understand and interact with the other street players --- planners, architects, business. The demise of the gallery and the gallery system is the lifeblood, potentially, of the public space. The artist can bring new dimensions and vitality to the places of public gathering and public ownership. There is no SAATCHI here to promote younger artists of his choice, there is only the people, who choose their own champions. What is the essence of this new opportunity for ART?

In the past our public spaces have largely been the passive recipients of art

works. Very often these have been municipal ---- their ambition to celebrate or commemorate figures or events from the past. There has been an element of control, which has curtailed the creative potential of the most public of places for artworks.

Today the situation is more open and the opportunity exists for the artist to redefine the space itself rather than simply produce work to be sited by others. The role of the artist in determining our external experience is essential. Without the artist, the role falls to the landscape architects and/or the urban designers. Current art practice goes way beyond the idea of the object placed in space. Appropriately, the content of our "public realm" must reflect the people who use it by going way beyond a town councillor's view on what ART is.

The idea of public space as something other than a surface to connect two front doors is radical. The work of PUBLIC ART through its rich and diverse activities sets out to question the nature of this space --- that every town & city has in abundance ---- and programme it as opposed to designing it. The distinction between these two activities is vital. One is about beautification, which often degenerates into style or heritage. The other is about reclaiming the space for genuine public use.

If the street could be the city art gallery, then why not a school? No shops but markets? No theatre but a continuous performance? The public realm has the ability to liberate many of our treasured institutions in such a way that they could be redefined. This is the work of the artist and architect, alongside the rest of the community.