

## **1. Introduction: What is public art?**

Generally, the term 'public art' has been used to describe a piece of sculpture or installation in a public space. However, since the early nineties the feminist artist and curator, Suzanne Lacy has sought to consider this broad term in four more specific areas. One of these is particularly relevant to my work and has been labelled by her as 'new genre public art' to describe a form of art that is public art that deals with pressing contemporary issues. In relation to this, she has organised a group of artists with a broad range of backgrounds and perspectives to develop a new form of art, the aim of which is to focus on engagement. It is this engagement that is an important part of its aesthetic language (Lacy, 1995 p.19). It is public, not merely in its location, but also as it is socially engaged and as such is in the public interest. The involvement with political issues often creates considerable public debate surrounding this form of creativity and I label this a 'social sign'. This work of art is able to depict a range of issues in the public sphere directly and is able to indicate its political position strongly.

This paper examines the 'aesthetic value' of public art through the semiotic process. I am going to explore unconventional definitions of 'aesthetic' and try to redefine aesthetic value in contemporary public art. The concept of beauty dictates not only the 'comprehensibility' of sensibility, but also intellectual communication. I believe that contemporary art work depicts beauty as a social sign, and contemporary art work refers to an ideology which can enable people to share. However, it could also be interpreted differently according to one's individual interest, experience and self consciousness. Therefore the process of creating art is a form of communication/interaction that enables an audience to acquire the aesthetic itself and this defines 'aesthetic value'.

## **2. My Project : Poems on the Underground**

Nowadays emerging artists and professionals alike still use public art to promote their ideas or to establish censorship-free contact between viewer and artist. This power of public art to open a debate on public issues in the contemporary art scene is what makes public art a particularly significant phenomenon. I am a person who has a keen interest in and desire to be a part of artistic

development. Through my art projects, I attempt to represent aspects of the culture in which I live as well as to react to the society by engaging with people.

I am living in London, one of the most international and diverse cities in the world, as a foreigner. In recent decades many different ethnic groups have migrated to Britain and they have adapted their own culture to the new environment. This modification of many different aspects of culture has caused the narrative cultural topography of this city to be made up of the montage of different cultures and the discontinuity of spatial structure. Therefore when I embarked on my practice here I explored London; especially ethnic communities containing specific cultural characteristics such as China town, Hackney and Southall.



*Poems on the Underground, 2009*

I think that food is one of the most significant aspects that indicate one's own culture and so I started to collect restaurant names from different areas in London. In my project, *Poems on the Underground*, I attempted to illustrate the ethnic diversity of London also to engage with the public by creating a poetic performance text made up of restaurant names. With the help of participants living in London from various ethnic backgrounds including Chinese, Greek, Indian, and Turkish backgrounds, I arranged these restaurant names to compose a series of poems themed on each ethnic group. Then these were printed onto posters that were of the exact same format as the original 'Poems on the Underground', installed onto the underground trains and were left there for people to see.

Moreover, I even ran a 'restaurant' in a project space in Chelsea College of Art & Design, to create

an active and dynamic relationship with an audience. They doubled as customers and were offered several typical types of simple dishes, such as Chinese noodles, Pita bread, Nan bread and Crumpets and the poems from the *Poems on the Underground* project were placed on the walls for people to read. The aim was to create an ongoing relational activity rather than merely to show works in the gallery space. By relating with people, the project is one way of the reflection of cultural image of the society which we share.

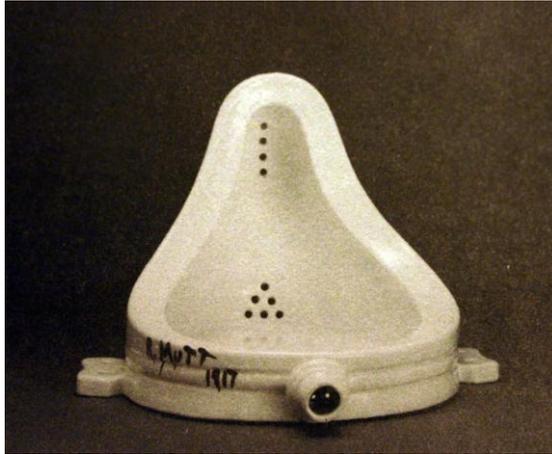


Restaurant: *Salaam Namaste Venus in Golden Pagoda*, 2009

By creating debates around some of the most profound issues in the contemporary art, especially theoretical and political perspectives on artistic practice, I want to explore innovative methods for constructing public audiences, mainly by using site specific work and mixing different genres. For me, the most fundamentally important function of art is to have an aesthetic value that comes from the process of making the work and not simply the result. Therefore, socially engaging art has an aesthetic value that, through the process of its execution, communicates with people.

### **3. Aesthetic as an intellectual communication**

The word 'aesthetic' is derived from the Greek word *aisthetos*, which means 'sensuous' or 'perceptible'. This takes the first historical point of reference for the aesthetic is as sensuous cognitive faculty and as such it is only defined as 'comprehensibility' for the senses (Welsch, 1997 p.35).



Marcel Duchamp: *Fountain*, 1917 (Staniszewski, 1995, p15)

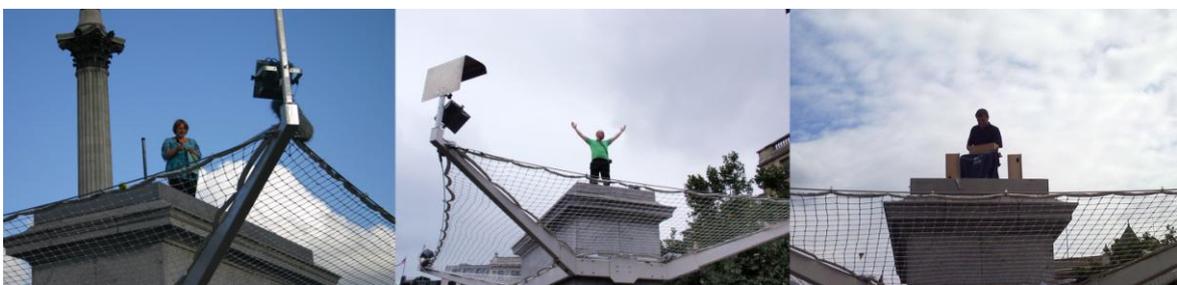
However, this historical definition is based on a historical understanding of the notion and does not explain enough about the aesthetic of some contemporary art work which emphasises the intellectual, rather than sensual perspective and which finds its conceptual roots in the modernist tradition. There is the urinal signed by Marcel Duchamp which is accepted as one of the most influential artworks of the 20th century. However, it is possible to question the difference between Marcel Duchamp's urinal, which is titled *Fountain* (1917), and ordinary industrially produced urinals at the market. Many would ask how Duchamp's *Fountain* can be seen as art. Using this work as an example, Arthur C. Danto, in his book *After the End of Art*, suggests that rather than just the object produced, it is also the discourse itself that constitutes art, and this view forms a new concept of art. In this book, he is convinced that as far as appearances are concerned anything can be a work of art, even without a palpably beautiful visual object. What it requires to transform it into art is intellectual consideration (Danto, 1998). In other words, art does not need to be solely 'illustrational', and the way of communication itself, which involves 'questioning philosophically what art essentially is', can in fact be considered art (Danto, 1998 p.35).

In this way the concept of contemporary aesthetics is freed from a dependence on historical aesthetic values, and as a result public art work can also have aesthetic value, due to semiotic and allegorical process required to produce it. In spite of the statement by Danto, the view that art's most fundamental importance is the aesthetic of the art work and that this is the 'comprehensibility of the intellect', can be challenged. How can an intellectual consideration of art work, in the sense

of having aesthetic value?

Above all, it could be assumed that all artificial objects could be defined as possessing value, status and a reason for existence due to the fact humans intentionally produced it. According to Belton, the definition of art is related to 'artificial'- that is, produced by human beings rather than nature (Belton, 2004 p.14). That is to say, art is one part of human agency which does not come from a natural impulse, but from intensive artifice, making it possible to discuss its value, status and the reason it exists.

A number of philosophers might agree that the introduction of technology and the development of mass media have begun to influence our recognition and understanding of image and gesture. Firstly, nowadays consumption is becoming a greater priority than production in our capitalistic system; therefore it is no wonder that people are gradually starting to consume signs as valued property. In addition, the development of mass media has exposed many people to diverse signs/images and as a consequence they have learned automatically how to select/interpret an aspect among the polysemous meanings of sign. Perhaps, it means people are adapted to interpret the sign and the significatum. Furthermore, they approach subject matter aware of the various dimensions of its semiotic significance. Following these change in the progress of our perception, in the art scene, the way people consume aesthetic value has changed as well. For that reason, semiotic progress has developed among artists: in fact, we can see many brilliant examples, like Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* which captured the transitional movement.



Antony Gormley: *One & Other*, Trafalgar Square, 2009

Recently, an established British artist Antony Gormley suggested a project called *One & Other* (2009). The idea is to have a living sculpture on the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square carrying out a

performance of one's choice. The subject will thousands of people, who will present themselves one by one, but who were randomly selected through the official website ([www.oneandother.co.uk](http://www.oneandother.co.uk)) rotating every hour, making the plinth their own. Participants may play musical instruments or protest against particular upcoming issues or advertise themselves to crave public attention. The project started on 6<sup>th</sup> June and will last for one hundred continuous days.

The concept of this project *One & Other* relates to the historical idea of images (specifically sculptures) on plinths in public space. In an interview of one hundred people, including both spectators and participants, approximately seventy percent found the act to be generally interesting and said that the idea behind *One & Other* could be considered as art. However, when asked to consider the performance on the fourth plinth as an artwork they said it depended on what the performer was actually doing. Interestingly more than twenty percent said no matter what kind of performance took place, they viewed it as an image/or a sculpture in itself so, it would appear that not only the idea but also the action of occupying the fourth plinth is seen as art. There was a clear difference in response among the age groups asked. Most of the younger generations gave positive feedback, which shows that the contemporary concept of aesthetic has extended over the years since Duchamp. It also means that people are now more readily prepared to accept the action as art and are able to consume/interpret it as a sign/ image, which means that they can evaluate it as an artwork.



Interview with *One & Other* audiences, Trafalgar Square, 2009

Art work, of course, can refer to the ideology which can enable people to share, however, it also could be interpreted differently, according to one's individual interests, experience and self-consciousness. Therefore, an art work becomes the sign which is a property that is related to not

only the artist's interest but also the interpreter's interest; therefore, existing as art work, finally, it represents aesthetic values. It is possible that the process, in which art work is communicated as a sign with the audience, has the aesthetic value itself. As the result, the sequence of art events have been acquired beauty itself.

#### **4. The aesthetic language of public art**

Usually public art work is evaluated within the context of social considerations, to the expense of concern or interest in the application of an aesthetic language. The debate about beauty is not completely excluded from this area of artistic expression but there tends to be an overemphasis on its social function to the detriment of any in-depth consideration of its aesthetic value. This aspect should not be undervalued and in fact public art work involves more than just an attractive product.

An aesthetic value that comes from the process of making the work and not simply the result through the process of its execution, communicates with people intellectually. Jeff Kelly states that "Processes are also metaphors. They are powerful containers of meaning. You have to have people who can evaluate the qualities of a process, just as they evaluate the qualities of a product. There is a false dichotomy that's always talked about, even by us, between object and processes" (Lacy, 1995 p45). An aesthetic value that emerges from semiotic processes that humans experience from art can be gained not only from materialised art work or art objects but also from the process of on-going public art project. Public art allows there to be an expansion of aesthetic boundaries and enables their process to be regarded as values, not merely physical objects or visual outcomes.

In the process of creating public art, I propose that the audience should not only interpret the meaning of the art work as it is embodied in symbolic acts as a social sign but also actively participate/react to the work by placing oneself at the centre of the art making a process that leads from their major concerns and related issues: Therefore the passive consumers/communicator become the active collaborators in the process of participatory events that involve the art works more actively to recreate/rebuild the integrity of social context of the work. Jeff Kelly further

explains that a process of mutual transformation takes place within collaboration as the interactions between the collaborating parties causes the creative process itself to transform (Kelly, 1995 p140).

Referring back to the previously discussed *One & Other* project by Gormley, Clare Wood, a participant who was interviewed, explains that she was very surprised by the positive response and encouragements from the audience. She felt that she actually interacted and communicated with the people and there was full of excitement and energy around the fourth plinth. The way the project encourages the public to react and interact around the fourth plinth opens the possibility for artwork to actively relate to the public.



Interview with Clare Wood the participant in *One & Other*, Trafalgar Square, 2009

There are several other examples that illustrate the relationship between artwork and the public.

Haha is a collaborative artist group based in Chicago. Its four members-Richard House, Wendy Jacob, Laurie Palmer, and John Ploof- wanted to be part of artistic development to pursue a socially engaged and interactive artistic direction. In 1992, Haha organised a group of AIDS volunteers, *Flood* (1992-95) which aimed to actively participate in AIDS healthcare. By collaborating with artists including Haha, *Flood* built a storefront hydroponic vegetable garden in Rogers Park, a multiracial, multiethnic and middle class neighbourhood in northern Chicago and ran several workshops which provided bi-weekly meals, educational activities, public events, and information on alternative therapies for HIV/AIDS service. For them process is more important than product. According to a Haha representative, the group's main theme is the idea of usefulness, not merely the practical benefits that an object may offer, but also the usefulness as a metaphor (Jacob,

1995 p.95). Michael Brenson describes the *Flood* project as one of most successful community based art, that it indicates its political manifesto through the symbolised action as well as it shows wonderful connection between art work and audience. As a result of the active efforts of the participants, the horticultural laboratory, the laboratory for the imagination and class room, and the hydroponic garden encouraged participants and visitors trust and hope. It clearly redefined the relationship between public artists and audience as it entailed the immersion of artists in urban community (Brenson, 1995 p.38). Even though it started as an organisation by Haha, after Haha's involvement came to an end *Flood* ran the workshops independently for two more years. *Flood* led their own workshops and took care of the garden themselves and this achievement is known to be one of the most successful cases in public art history.



Haha: *Flood*, 1992 (Jacob, 1995, p94)

Another project team, Mixrice based in Gyeonggi-do, Korea, was formed in 2001 to deal with the issues of illegal foreign migrant workers by studying their living and working conditions in Korea. Their key aim is to continuously increase awareness of the realities of the illegal foreign workers and the current multi-cultural status of Korean society. They organised a project called *Mixrice Channel* (2003) and *Tent Theatre* (2003) in a public place in Bucheon, Gyeonggi-do, in which they offered the opportunity for those workers to share their experiences, worries and hopes as an illegal foreign worker in Korea, and to search for potential solutions.

Mixrice aims to depict their work with 'non-aesthetic' and 'non-subject'. However, I think, collaborating with related participants has formed a new approach to achieve aesthetic value. Korean aesthetic expert and art critic Sumi Kang states in her essay in *Public Art: Architecture and Participation* that Mixrice's trivial activities are all 'new models of art and cultural activity' and 'non-institutional artistic art' in that through this mixing, public culture-art practice that spreads the experiences of mutual harmony and sharing among subjects of different circumstances takes place instead of the dominant grammar and words of certain somebodies (Kang, 2009, p125).



Mixrice: *Mixrice Channel*, 2003 (Beck, 2005, p143)



Mixrice: *Tent Theatre*, 2003 (Beck, 2005, p142)

Public art exists not only as a social sign but also as a social experience. As a result of its ongoing process between art work and audience, public art has earned aesthetic value as a more active form of communication. Public art has been free from a typology of materials or artistic media construction, and much has been built on concepts of interaction, relationship, communication and political intention. A significant interaction often occurs with the audience who engages the work in an interactive and active manner. Through this ongoing process a relationship is built, and this in turn produces new artistic territory which people can share, and in addition refers to multiple perspectives which are based on individuality so as to activate both individual and communities. (3268)

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