

Vitrine (noun): a glass display case: from French, shop window: ultimately from Latin - vitrum, glass (Oxford English Dictionary)



'Three Functions' by Hewitt&Jordan

13 May - 8 July 2005

'Sloganeering'

by Dave Beech

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, that 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...

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